You call That Service?
5
Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by
Hiroki Ozaki

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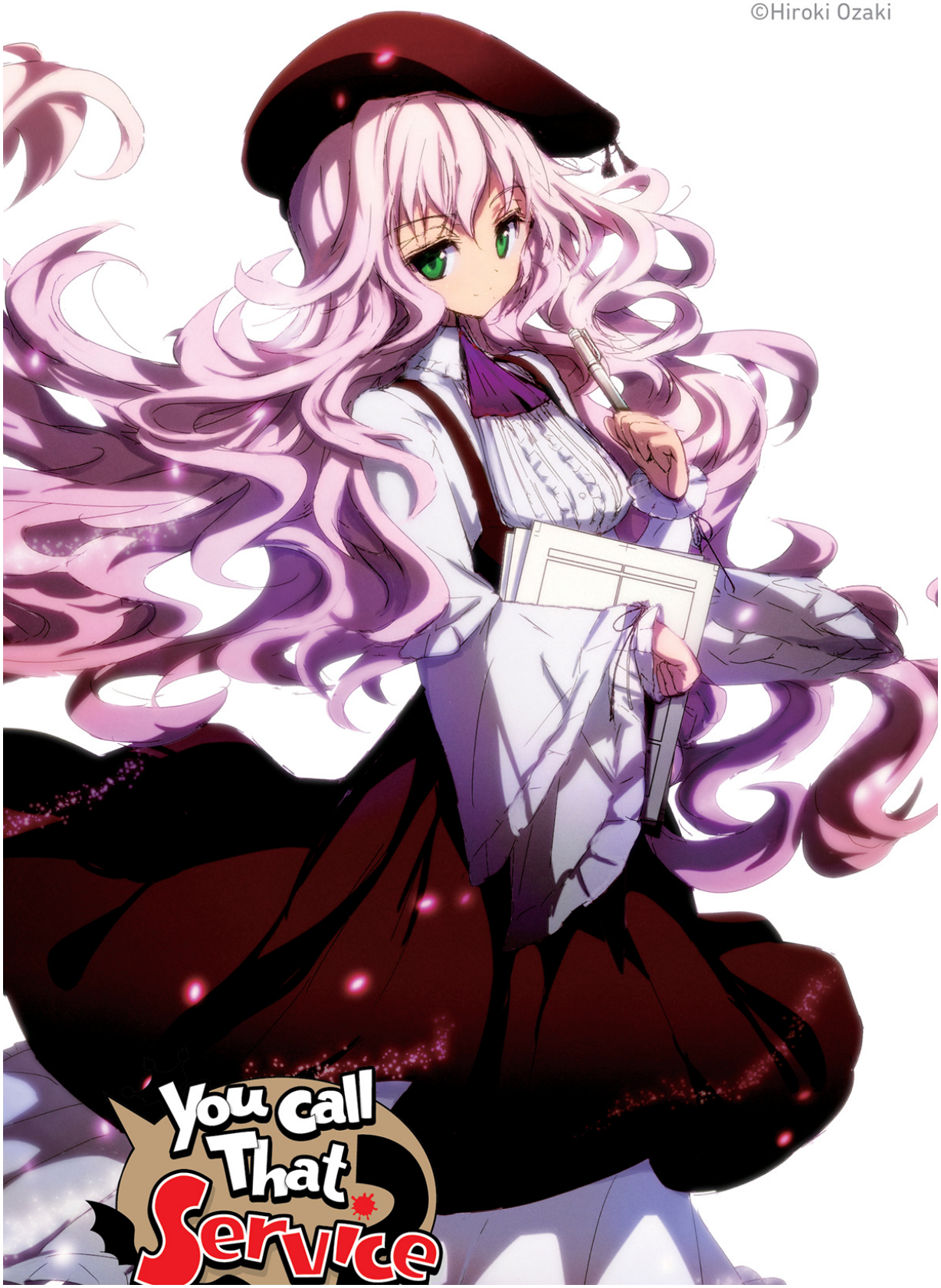

You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!
Now a TV anime!
This slapstick comedy is finally reaching screens after two thousand years!
Tuesdays at 11 PM
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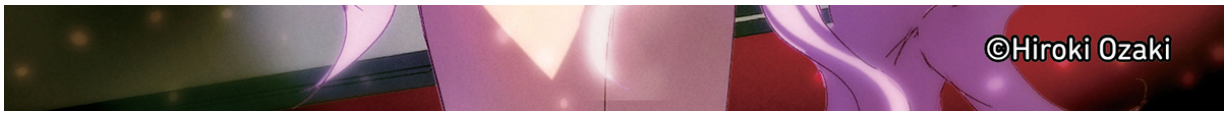
"Ahh, what a refreshing shower… Hmm?"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CONTENTS

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Prologue

Episode 1 LET'S SERVE RYOUTA!

Episode 2 LET'S GO AND SERVE THE MASTER!

Episode 3 LET'S GO TO JAPAN WITH THE ARCHBISHOP!

Episode 4 LET'S STAY AT A HOTEL IN TOKYO!

Episode 5 LET'S SEARCH FOR ALFONCINA!

Epilogue

You Call That a Haunted House?

Shiren Fuyukura

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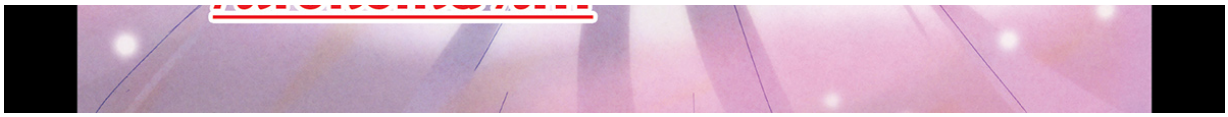
Alfoncina XIII



KISETSU MORITA
Illustration by
HIROKI OZAKI

YEN ON
New York

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Kisetsu Morita

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt
Cover art by Hiroki Ozaki

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Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Prologue
Episode 1: Let’s Serve Ryouta!
Episode 2: Let’s Go and Serve The Master!
Episode 3: Let’s Go to Japan with the Archbishop!
Episode 4: Let’s Stay at a Hotel in Tokyo!
Episode 5: Let’s Search for Alfoncina!
Epilogue

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

You call That Service?

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Characters

Ryouta Asagiri

A second-year high school student who wandered into the Sacred Blood Empire. He is cursed to be extremely attractive to human females. He became Shiren's minion and now lives with her.

Shiren Fuyukura

There was some distance between Shiren and her older sister, the emperor, because Shiren is the daughter of someone suspected of assassinating the previous emperor, but they recently made up. Ryouta's master.

Ouka Sarano

The current emperor, who claimed independence from Japan for the Sacred Blood Empire. Shiren's older sister. An old friend of Ryouta's from elementary school.

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PROLOGUE

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PROLOGUE

"Thanks for letting us use your car, Sasara…"

"This is nothing, really. I am partially responsible for all this. Just rest."

The Tatsunami family car left the hospital and cruised smoothly along the city streets toward the Fuyukura household.

Ryouta sat in the center of the back seat, with Sasara on his right and Shiren on his left.

"Still, I didn't think they'd let me home this early. I thought they would keep me for a little while longer…"

Ryouta had been in horrible shape after fighting Sasara's suitor Toraha to prevent her from marrying him. Luckily, though, he just narrowly escaped death.

"You have no broken bones and no internal injuries. It is simply your energy that needs recovering."

"Didn't know humans were so durable…" Ryouta had been convinced he would need to stay for at least a week. He wasn't expecting to be discharged after a few days.

Of course, Shiren had been fervently looking after him during those few days, but he'd still left the hospital pretty quickly.

"About that—the doctor seemed surprised, too. He said it's likely due to your being a minion," said Sasara.

"Wait, really?"

"Minions are connected mentally to a Sacred Blooded, so it is said that their ability to recover approaches a similar level. That depends on the power of the original master, however."

"So you mean it's thanks to *me*!" Shiren sat to the left side of Ryouta, her arms haughtily crossed. "To save one's minion, even from afar—what an ideal master-servant relationship. No need to thank me excessively, Ryouta. All you need to do is make me tomato-based cuisine for the rest of my li—"

“No,” Ryouta quickly refused.

“Wh-why, Ryouta?! There’s nothing wrong with cooking tomatoes! You can add cold tomatoes to dishes, too!”

“*That’s* what you want to comment on?!”

“The minion problem is serious, obviously! I am not happy! What is the meaning of this? Are you in your rebellious phase?!” Her pigtails were starting to stand on end, like they were being shocked by static electricity.

“You haven’t made me your minion at all. Look, I don’t have any kind of telepathic connection with you or anything.”

“So you’re saying it’s because of someone else…” Shiren huffed. That wasn’t exciting news for his master.

“Oh…I don’t have any ulterior motives here… I’m just telling you the objective truth…”

“I—I know that…”

“It’s probably Shijou or Alfoncina.”

Those were the only two who’d come closest to making him their minion in the past.

Shiren’s shoulders drooped; she had no choice but to accept the truth. “Cheater…”

“A cheater?” Ryouta asked in return, and Shiren’s face immediately went red.

“No, no! I just used the word *cheater* because *my* minion got bitten by other Sacred Blooded!”

“Y-yeah, I know that…”

Shiren was protesting a bit too much to be convincing.

“But I am glad you are safe.” Sasara squeezed Ryouta’s hand. “If you had died for my sake, I don’t know what I would…”

Even though Ryouta was safe and sound, Sasara was yet again nearly distraught.

Ryouta had been hospitalized because of her matchmaking situation, so she must have felt guilty about it.

“That’s not it. I chose to go there. There really isn’t anything you need to worry over.” Ryouta squeezed Sasara’s hand a little harder. “Your life should be full of fun and joy. That’s why I did what I did.”

“Yes. I will rethink who I wish to marry, as well.” A thoughtful expression crossed her face. “M-maybe… Perhaps I can consider some of

the other Imperial guards as candidates when I do…" She glanced at him.

"Yeah, a coworker of yours isn't such a bad idea."

Ryouta was a part of the Imperial Guard, but he didn't count himself among them. He didn't think nearly enough of himself for that.

"You'd be on the same wavelength with someone who has the same job, so I think that's perfect for you."

"I-indeed… It may indeed be perfect for me…" Her face went red, but the blush appeared to be a happy one.

"Oh yeah, guys aren't allowed to be a part of the Imperial Guard, are they…?" Ryouta mused. "Emperor Ouka's a girl, after all…"

"Well, you are a minor noble yourself, s-so I would not say it is entirely impossible… O-of course, it would just be as a candidate…"

There was a comfortable atmosphere in the car. And because it was such close quarters, everyone could sense it right away.

I—I feel weird… Something's going on near my arm… Hey, it hurts…?

A jolt of pain ran through Ryouta's left arm.

"Owwwwwww! That's where the sword got me!"

He was being pinched.

"It seems you've gotten a looooooot closer now, haven't you, *Ryouta*?" Shiren's face was almost demonic. She was trying to force herself to smile, but her eyes were glazed over with jealousy for a more *terrifying* and *mad* kind of effect. "You are my minion, and I need you to have adequate communication skills. Staying cooped up at home snacking on bloodtato chips, chocoblood, and bloodtoes (hot blood flavor) is out of the question."

"You really need the word *blood* in your snacks, don't you?!"

"Well, but—" Shiren's pigtails were clearly standing on edge now to indicate her anger. It was a mystery as to what sort of genes allowed this phenomenon. "—Just don't forget that I'm your master. Okay?"

"I know, I know…and come on, don't pinch me on my cut… I'm injured here…"

When he pointed out his wound, worry immediately crossed Shiren's face. "I really wish you'd stay out of battles to begin with…"

"Are you still in pain, Ryouta?"

"I don't know if I'd say *in pain*. More like *tired*. Recovery takes a lot of energy, so it feels like I've been working for a week nonstop."

"Then I will take pity on you."

“Huh?”

Her face went red, and her head drooped. “Didn’t I say I’d serve you until you got better…? If you’re still hurt, then I’m going to give you the best service when we get home! Y-you’d better be ready for it!”

It must have been embarrassing for her to say she was going to serve him, considering how she was always ordering him to serve her.

“An intimate relationship is necessary for the bond between master and minion. It’s the master’s job to allow you a thorough rest when you’re tired. Unlike some jobs, I intend to give you vacation days. That’s why I’m going to serve you, so you get better quickly…”

“Thanks…I appreciate it…” It was a little embarrassing for Ryouta, too.

“That’s the kind of relationship…keeping us together, Ryouta…”

An odd atmosphere settled over the car again.

And of course, the close quarters meant everyone felt it right away.

“*Ahem, ahem, ahem.* Ah, driver Yamamoto, could you please play us some music? *Enka*, folk music, folk dance—anything that the young people nowadays would absolutely hate right away, please!”

“How about this, Lady Sasara?”

“Ah~ ♪ Let us begin the Sacred Blooded Dance! Haaah! Yoisho, yoisho! Dodon, don! ♪ Choisa, choisa! Ah, sorei! ♪”

“What is this?!” Shiren complained. “Why does it sound like it’s for a summer dance festival?! This is awful!”

“Oh, I simply wanted a different mood for the ride. I have no other motives.”

Sasara and Shiren glared at each other; clearly, much was going unsaid.

Ryouta sat stiffly between them. He was really hoping they would get home soon…

There was nothing he could do about them, though, so he turned his attention to the music.

“Today we have rain of blood, tomorrow we’ll have rain of blood, all so bloody, all so bloody, the Sacred Blooded Dance~. Yoyoi, yoi! ♪”

“It’s a happy song, but the lyrics are horrifying! What even is this music?!”

This country didn’t have actual music, Ryouta concluded. He still hadn’t heard any songs that had regular lyrics as of yet.

“This is a very popular song here in the Empire. They played it at our previous festival.”

“Yeah, you’re not a real Sacred Blooded if you don’t know it.”

Now Shiren and Sasara were on the same page.

“I know I have a hard time keeping up with current events, but I’m not really interested in picking up this song.”

“*Sigh*, you still have much to learn about the Empire.”

“Indeed. If you don’t adapt, life here will only get harder with time.”

“As a fellow Imperial guard, I would be happy to educate you.”

“Educating one’s minion is the job of the master.”

“I will do it.”

“No, *I* will do it!”

But soon, they were back to glaring at each other again.

Can’t we get there any faster…? Ryouta prayed quietly to himself.

Everyone quickly felt the growing darkness in these close quarters.

At least give me a window seat…

Characters

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji

Ryouta's classmate from school in Japan, as well as his stalker. She followed him into the Sacred Blood Empire. Assassin for the Virginal Father.

Tamaki Shijou

Classmate of Shiren and Ryouta. She's typically calm and collected, but once she slips into a pessimistic mood, there's no coming back for a while.

Sasara Tatsunami

A personal guard for the emperor, Ouka. She is madly in love with her liege and will often act recklessly as a result.

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EPISODE 1
LET'S SERVE RYOUTA!

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EPISODE 1

LET'S SERVE RYOUTA!

Ten minutes later, Ryouta and Shiren arrived at the Fuyukura household.

She brought down a blanket.

"Ryouta, sleep on the couch. You can see the TV from there."

"Oh, thanks. But it's time to make dinner, so I'll—"

"No, I'm cooking today! I'm serving you!" Shiren said, sticking out her hand at him in a dramatic *no!* kind of pose. It made him think of something he'd see in Kabuki. "You need energy to recover, so you can rest for a few days. See? I'm not child… Wh-who are you calling infant-sized?! I'm no ironing board or flatheaded baby!"

"I didn't say anything! You're so self-conscious, you've got a victim complex!"

"Anyway, I am not a child. I pay the adult fare on public transportation," she insisted, as a child might. "I could take care of one or two of you, Ryouta! Leave this to me!"

"I sure hope there aren't two of me."

"There could be fifty, a hundred of you, and it'd be a piece of cake. I could round you all up in one go!"

"I'm not a low-level trash mob, am I?!"

"And then you will pledge a higher degree of loyalty to your dear master! When you next serve, think of how your master served you and let it stir your heart! Let the tears stream down your face!"

"This is starting to sound super patronizing…"

It was like a high-interest loan, which he was starting to feel would just make things worse down the line.

"But everyone else will get ahead of me if I don't do this."

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"Nothing! I don't have any ulterior motives! As they say in English, *I DON'T HAVE UNDER MIND*!"

“That’s definitely not right!”

Despite her bragging about adult fares, her academic ability was awful, at the least.

“Wh-what…? I’ve been studying English really hard, though… I learned how to spell *b-a-n-a-n-a* and *t-o-m-a-t-o*…”

“You know those are basically the same as in Japanese, right?”

“Anyway, I’m serving you, so you rest, Ryouta! We need to do this quickly; otherwise, Rei might come by and say that *she’s* going to be taking care of you! We need to hurry up before that happens!”

“How do I rest quickly…?”

He was still confused, but she was just going to get even angrier with him if he didn’t follow orders, so he lay down on the couch.

Shiren was in the kitchen, the next room over, apparently ready to start cooking.

I don’t trust her at all, but I have no choice except to let her do it…

Ryouta already knew that Shiren’s cooking skills were catastrophically bad.

“Hey, don’t force yourself to get too creative, okay?! You can get ready-made meals, too! Actually, please don’t get creative at all!”

Amateurs often made their own adjustments without knowing the effects they would have; this, on top of the typical mistakes an unpracticed hand would make, often resulted in chaos.

It was like someone who didn’t know anything about fashion trying on clothes from Paris Fashion Week—a disaster waiting to happen.

“And you don’t need to add any olive oil, Chinese chili-bean sauce, or Japanese pepper as a secret ingredient, okay? When an amateur does it, you won’t bring any flavors out at all. You’ll just ruin it!”

Ryouta was fussy about this, considering the kitchen was usually his domain.

She had to master simple recipes before anything else. Everything began with a first step. Everyone had to start off knowing how to make a decent curry.

“It’s all right. I’m looking at a cookbook and following the recipe exactly. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I guess you’re right…”

“Let’s see here… First, I put salt, sugar, olive oil, Chinese chili-bean

sauce, and Japanese pepper into the pot…”

“You’re not keeping to the recipe at all! And don’t start off with all your secret ingredients at once!”

“This is right! This is what the book is telling me to do!”

“Are you sure?! If it’s in the book, then I guess it’s okay…”

“Then I add one hamburger and one piece of fried chicken, then mix well…”

“Wait, wait, now it’s just weird!”

The recipe was including food that was already made.

“I’m doing as it asks. I’m looking at a book called *With a Little Effort, Make Chain Dishes Taste Better* (Bloodeisha).”

“Just let me eat the hamburger and fried chicken, then!” He hated to be so blunt, but that would be safer.

“Okay, then next, I’m going to try the tomato sauce–style miso mackerel written in this book, *Avant-Garde Cooking: An Encounter with the Unknown* (Bloodansha).”

“Stop! Use a book that has regular recipes in it! And when did you buy these things?!”

“I also have *My Cooking Methods Are Wrong, As I Expected* (Bloodgakukan) and *Truly Terrifying Home Cooking* (Bloodokawa).”

“How the heck would anyone make anything good from books with those titles?! Buy a normal one! *Please!*”

“Rei left these here. She talked about how making you one of these recipes was a dream of hers. Then I think she forgot about them.”

“She literally has no sense of taste…”

Rei was sickly, which affected her taste buds.

“Um, put in chili, chili, chili, and chili, then boil. Add chili, chili, and chili as the secret ingredient. When it starts looking like chili, put in a dash of chili. Pretend to add sugar, but it’s actually chili. At the very least, chili; at the very most, chili.”

“That sounds super spicy! You plan on feeding an injured person that?!”

“No one needs love, only chili. Throw everything away now and embrace the chili. And now a haiku: O spicy chili / It’s spicy, spicy chili / Wow, spicy chili.”

“You’re speaking just loud enough for me to hear you from the kitchen; you’re awful…” Ryouta turned on the TV to escape reality.

The Sanguine News program should be on at the moment. It was perfect, considering how he had no idea what the current political situation was like.

"In our next segment, the government has officially decided to dispatch a special envoy to normalize relations between the Empire and Japan."

The newscaster was reading the headlines—surprisingly legitimate for the Empire.

The camera showed a close-up of Ouka, dressed for the occasion in a suit.

That's a good look for her…

Ryouta couldn't help but stare, considering he basically never saw this side of her.

"After talks with the leader of Japan, we have officially agreed to send a special envoy for the growth of both our countries. I hope, as your emperor, that we are able to conduct constructive talks."

Her face was aloof, almost authoritative, probably because of the situation she was in.

"However, the selection of our envoy and the date of their dispatch will be kept secret out of consideration for their safety. I ask you to rest assured, because we will notify all of the results. As top brass, I am thinking hard about how we'll be able to acquire foreign currency, so I ask you to work hard. Then play hard and use your money to keep the economy going. That is all."

It was a mess of a speech, as always.

"In our next segment, we are announcing the anime adaptation of You're Rouko, I'm Kouko! *Learn about the voice cast after our commercial break! I'm looking forward to seeing who will be included!"*

"Oh, hey, they're finally putting *YouRou IKou!* on air," Ryouta commented.

"It's a weird feeling when a series you've been following from the beginning gets big. Exciting, but kind of sad at the same time."

"Yeah. I am happy that more people will know about it, but you don't get to feel in the know."

"And then there's the question of whether or not they'll keep the vibe of the original. Well, the original is in an entirely different medium, so I don't think it's that important to preserve the tone, but you still hope it'll be

good.”

“Yeah. But that’s just how it is as a fan.”

“I’m certain they’ve been waiting for the perfect time to make the anime, so I have no doubt in my mind that they’re using a good production company and a good director. Ah, right, I’ll have to give congratulations to Alfoncina.”

“Good idea; she’s been working hard as Kin Hayashimori, too.”

“Oh, and speaking of anime, season two of *Cat-Eared Abbot: The Zen Mind* is incredibly good. I have it recorded, so watch it.”

“Isn’t *Cat-Eared Abbot* that slapstick manga with the bald monk with cat ears? Hard to forget that one.”

“Yes. The main character is deep, but the characters around him are super cute, so it gets a lot of fanworks. When you put a manga with such a unique cast of characters in a boy’s magazine, those characters seem almost thirty percent cuter than they actually are. I’d say that applies here.”

“Ah-ha, I’ll check it out.”

“They used the Heart Sutra for the second-season opening, too. It was a big shock.”

“—Hey, by the way?”

“What is it?”

“Weren’t you cooking?”

At some point, Shiren had come to stand in front of the TV. “I heard the word *anime* and came running…”

“Don’t you need to watch the pot? Are you sure it’s not burning or anything?”

Bang.

That was not a sound you wanted to hear, especially not in the kitchen.

“That definitely sounded like an explosion; are you sure things are okay back there…?”

“Oh no! I put in so much chili that it blew up the pot!”

“How on Earth did that happen?! You had to have put in something besides pepper, right?!”

“Oh, the hamburger and fried chicken are all over the kitchen now…”

Ryouta knew now that he couldn’t depend on Shiren for this. “Okay, we need to think of our next best option…”

He took out his cell phone from his pocket.

He had over a hundred fifty unread texts, but they were all from Kiyomizu and therefore safe to ignore. However, Kiyomizu was the one he intended to call now.

"Hello, this is Kiyomizu, Ryouta dearest's slave in love!"

"If you're my slave, then actually do what I say and don't come into my house without permission."

"But I read the deepest parts of your heart, and they say you want me to come!"

"You sure are stubborn… So where are you right now?"

"In your room!"

"Why?! You seriously never listen…" Ryouta was relieved he wasn't resting in his room.

"I've been keeping watch to make sure no stalker will break in and steal your daily necessities while you've been away, Ryouta dearest!"

"Right, thanks. So could you tell me why you aren't counting yourself as a stalker?"

"You may pay with your body!"

That was just going to be a headache to deal with, so he ignored it.

"But I thought we locked everything (to keep intruders out)."

"Love is not bound to dimensions or space-time!"

Her excuses were getting out of hand.

"So what is it you need? I think it's a bit early for me to start my night guard (and I mean that in a sexual way). Ah, but if I were with you all the time, anywhere, twenty-four hours a day, ahhhh…"

"You're already in the house, so whatever. Guard my room if you want."

"Roger! Oh, a bug's gotten into the room! I'll use my chili bomb to destroy it!"

"Did you put gunpowder or something in the chili? What is going on…? And don't set off any explosions—I mean it!"

Next, he decided to call Rei.

"Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem… Help, I'm coughing so much, I can't breathe…"

"That's a new one! You've never asked for help the instant you picked up before…"

It was impeccable timing, really.

"Oh, I'm better… Ehem, it's your sister. What do you need?"

"Rei, you're coming to tutor Shiren today, right?"

"Oh… It's getting worse… I think this is the end…"

Communicating with her wasn't easy.

"Uh, if this is too much for you, I'll just hang up…"

"I'm better again… Yes, I'll be around to tutor. I am not powerful enough to raise the grades of someone as stupid as Shiren, though."

"Thanks for the honesty. Also, can you grab something to eat on the way? I'll pay you later."

"Are you okay with fast food?"

"Yeah, perfect. Thanks."

Next, he called Tamaki.

"Oh, this is Tamaki. What a shock, receiving a call. Ahh, I'm so glad I didn't hang…"

"Uh…so glad you didn't hang what?"

"Myse—"

"Um, so, hey, Shijou, do you have time right now?"

He had a feeling that was something he shouldn't have asked, but he shrugged it off.

"Ha-ha-ha, my schedule? It's insignificant. In this world—"

"Cool, then can you bring over whatever food or snacks you have that are about to expire? I'll pay you later."

"All right. There are quite a lot of snacks that Kokoko opened, so I will bring those…"

Yet more bad news.

"We also have extra fried chicken, takoyaki*, croquettes, and meat buns from our hot-food selection, so I will bring those."*

"Sounds like they're not selling…"

"Why are they all bad? I don't know what to do anymore. I'm tired. I can't handle this. I hate it. I want to run away. Ah-ha-ha-ha, isn't it funny?"

"Not really, sorry."

This phone conversation was getting serious, and Ryouta was getting scared.

"Anyway, just bring whatever you have left! I'll pay! Sorry for the trouble, but I appreciate it!" He hurriedly hung up. "*Phew*, I think things will work out somehow…"

“Now let us toast to Ryouta dearest’s miraculous return home!”

Kiyomizu ended up taking the lead.

Besides Shiren and Ryouta, there was Kiyomizu, who had been in Ryouta’s room; Rei, who had come a bit earlier than everyone else; Tamaki, who’d brought the food; and Kokoko, who’d tagged along. They were all gathered in the living room.

On the table sat the fast-food hamburgers and fries that Rei brought along, and the convenience-store staples, courtesy of Tamaki.

“Ryou, why did you want to throw this little party?” Rei asked.

“Because I was worried dinner would be a failure otherwise.”

All their ingredients went *poof* in the explosion. There would almost always be some salvageable bits among the ashes of a failed cooking attempt, but there weren’t even any charred remains.

“That’s why I decided to invite everyone over for a party.”

“Indeed, one could say this is a very fine play of yours in a way… *Nom, nom,* mm, this burger with extra ketchup is delicious! The rich flavors of the condiments just take over my whole mouth until I can hardly taste the meat! But I just can’t find pure joy from it here… Ooh, these fries soaked in ketchup are delicious, too! A new way of thinking!”

“Can you stop narrating your dinner? You’re making no sense.”

Something didn’t really sit right with Shiren; the dissatisfaction was evident on her face. “But I was going to make food and then feed you…” Her pigtails were drooping more than normal.

“I appreciate the thought. Really. And it would’ve been a pain to head out to the grocery store at that hour. Just, y’know, focus on your strengths and stuff.”

Ryouta could tell that Shiren was trying her best, so he decided to give her a genuine compliment on it.

“Thanks, Ryouta. What do you think my strengths are, by the way?”

To be honest, I can’t think of anything…

He hadn’t thought that far, so he couldn’t come up with an answer on the spot. It was probably best if he changed the subject here.

“Oh, let’s put the TV on. Where’s the remote?”

Shiren jammed her fingers into his eyes.

“H-hey, I’m injured, remember…?”

“Don’t *you* think you’re being a little rude to your master…? I must be

good at something, right? Like English, or math?"

"I'm surprised you think you're good at that stuff with your grades… I'm actually impressed."

"My grades in English are five times higher than in science."

"No, your scores in science are just absurdly low."

Apparently, she'd never gotten anything higher than a twenty in math. She was going to need a tutor for a while.

"That's right, when you mentioned the TV I remembered that *ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ahem! Cough! Cough, cough, cough!* M-my chest…"

"Rei! Stop immediately leaving a conversation just as you try and join one! Now I really need to know what you remembered!"

"They said on the news that an envoy will apparently be going to Japan~. Oh, let me have some of the salad~. *Ehem, ehem, ehem.*"

"I don't think salad and coughing is a good combination… Yeah, some kind of diplomatic thing. That's big news, huh?"

"Of course it is. *Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem.* If it turns out well, then we might even get to travel freely between here and Japan."

"Travel…"

Maybe the day he could go back to Japan would finally come—although, in all honesty, he wasn't too keen on the idea.

He could already picture himself being stalked and targeted as he walked around the streets of Japan, having a generally terrible time thanks to his grandfather's curse. Still, that didn't mean he never wanted to go back.

"Do you want to go back to Japan…?" Shiren asked, surprised and worried.

Ryouta felt bad for having this conversation in front of her; it wasn't the place to do so.

"Let me be honest. I don't. It's much easier for me to live in the Empire."

"I see. That's fine, then…"

"But I do wish I could go visit sometimes. That's all."

"Yeah, the Empire is small, and there's barely any places to sightsee around here. But there is a small hot-springs area up north."

“Ryouta dearest! Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!! Let’s stay the night there!!” Kiyomizu inserted herself into the conversation with enthusiasm.

“Not a fan of that look in your eyes, Kiyomizu…”

“B-b-but it’s a hot-spring resort! We can stay the night! Sleepover! *Drooool…*”

“Whoa, you are really slobbering right now.”

Who knew what kind of outrageous fantasies were playing out in her mind?

“Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Ah-heh… Gah…”

“Her fantasies were so good that she passed out. She’s quiet now, at least. I’ll take it,” Shiren said.

“She’s the one person I don’t want to travel with… It’d be way too dangerous…,” Ryouta said.

Shiren placed a hand on Ryouta’s knee.

“Hey, Ryouta… Once you’re okay to travel…” Shiren seemed bashful, probably because she felt like she was being a little too forward. “Would you like to go somewhere together, alo—? Hrmph!”

At some point, all the snacks in the center had mostly vanished.

Fwsh, fwsh, fwsh!

Kokoko was snatching them up with incredible speed.

“Hey, you’re eating way too much. You’re a child; learn some self-control.”

“I’m older than that. I’m a god’s child.” Kokoko ignored the warning and kept her chopsticks in motion.

“Oh yeah, you’re right. Then act like an adult and leave some for the growing kids.”

“I’m still growing, too. I look like a child.”

“You and your stupid double standards! That’s unfair!”

“It’s the adults who aren’t being fair. You’re still a child if you can’t understand that.”

“Grrr!”

Kokoko had a good handle on their argument, which made Shiren so angry that her pigtails were practically standing on end again.

“But I am the master of this house—my house, my rules! So here, you—Listen to me! Stop eating!”

“Then you want to compete? Not that I’d ever lose.”

“Compete? For what…?”

They were in the middle of their meal, so a longer contest wouldn’t be the best.

“What about an eating contest?”

“I could crush you in an insta— Hey! Then we’d have nothing left to eat!” After a moment of thinking, Shiren came up with an idea. “I know, I’ll ask you some questions! And if you can answer them, you can eat as much as you want!”

“Hmm, I think I’d be able to answer any question you ask immediately —but fine, ask away.”

Ryouta figured this was going to be an easy victory for Kokoko. Shiren’s stupidity was honestly terrifying.

She’ll probably ask a really simple question like What is the capital of China? *and then she’ll get the answer* Beijing*, and it’ll all be over*.

“Ahh, Kokoko may look like a child, but that was still a reckless challenge… If Shiren asks what the capital of France is, this battle will be over in record time, *ehem, ehem*.” Rei, Shiren’s own tutor, had given up on her.

“Then here’s a geography question: **What’s the capital of Beijing?**”

“The *question* is wrong!”

“She’s stupider than I thought!”

“Ha, how do you like that, Kokoko? You don’t seem to have the answer. I win.”

“Sure, if that’s what you think. In your world.” Kokoko seemed considerably astonished as well. “Sis Tamaki, why is she this stupid? Did someone curse her?”

“I don’t think so…,” Tamaki replied. “Kokoko, please don’t ask me such difficult questions…”

“I’ll give you one more chance, Kokoko! **What’s the national capital of Gunma Prefecture?**”

“Hey, you dunce, listen. For your first question, Beijing isn’t the name of a country, so there was no right answer for that. But it makes sense that you would ask that question if you’ve assumed that Beijing is city-state based on a misunderstanding that you have alone. But your next question, about the national capital of Gunma Prefecture, is doubly strange. First, it

goes without saying that there is no country called Gunma Prefecture. And that the questioner herself is adding *prefecture* to the question. Which means that the questioner knows that Gunma is not a country. And yet you're asking me for the national capital. It's bizarre, honestly."

"Speak Japanese. I have no idea what you're saying."

"You see what I have to work with, Ryou," said Rei. "She doesn't even realize how stupid she is."

"Stop being so honest, Rei… She's beyond help…"

There was a whole mountain of problems with her now. It was certainly going to be a difficult job for her tutor.

"There's been a breakdown in communication. Not only that, but the fool also doesn't even realize her mistakes… Heh." Kokoko snorted. "I can't be bothered, so I'll take the loss." Kokoko plopped down onto Tamaki's lap. "Eat as much as you like. Kokoko sleeps."

Ryouta felt a twinge of jealousy toward Kokoko.

"Wah-ha-ha! I won, Ryouta! I won!"

"If you think you did, then I guess so…?"

"Oh dear… I don't have any simpler material for her, *ehem, ehem*…"

Kokoko didn't mind the noise and was fast asleep in about a minute.

"Aww, Kokoko really is a child." Tamaki gazed down gently at her.

"You two could totally be sisters."

"Yes, I have many siblings I am not related to by blood, including those I've never met. It doesn't feel at all strange to have a little sister like her, hee-hee… Stepsiblings can be malicious, even though we aren't technically total strangers…"

"Sorry! I didn't mean to touch on your homelife!"

"Oh, and will there be more relatives I don't know well coming into the store and asking to borrow money…? I could use some money myself…"

"Hey, since we're supposed to be having a party, why don't we just enjoy ourselves…? Okay? Okay…?"

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“But Kokoko is so cute; I really enjoy living with her. I would say she is less of a little sister to me and more like a daughter.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“That’s why I think it would be nice to have someone who could be my husband…” Tamaki glanced over to Ryouta with wide, round eyes.

“Huh?”

“Ahhh! No, no! I simply got carried away! No one would take over a failing convenience store! No one would even want to marry me anyway! I am horribly sorry—I got carried away! Please lend me your rope!”

“Why would I?! That just gives me a bad feeling!”

“No, I will be sure to pick a spot out of your way when I hang—”

“Hey, why don’t we turn the TV on?! Shiren, where’s the remote?”

“Oh, it’s over there. Right, Ryouta, let’s watch some TV! Yeah! *Darts Journey* should be playing right now! I wonder where in the Empire they’ll be going today!”

“That sounds like a total knockoff of a Japanese show… And the Empire is so small; where would they even go…?”

On screen was a man with a handful of darts. Whenever he saw a passerby, he mercilessly threw one of his darts at them.

“Every week, we visit a certain town and attack people indiscriminately—welcome to *Darts Journey*. Will we be able to escape the police this week?”

“How is this allowed on TV?!”

As the night grew late, they spent the time as they always did.

Then when the entourage all went home (after they had to basically kick Kiyomizu out)…

“*Phew*, that wasn’t as bad as I was expecting.” Ryouta emerged from the bath.

Since he was still injured, some of the water had gotten into his wounds, but it wasn’t really that much of an issue. He was getting his energy back much quicker than he thought he would. He didn’t have any problem walking around.

But when he came out of the bath, he heard a strange noise.

Thunk, bang, bwofffgeh.

“What is that? That doesn’t sound good to me…”

It was coming from upstairs. Maybe Kiyomizu had snuck back into their house?

Then speak of the devil, a text came.

> TITLE: I’m home~
> MESSAGE: Thank you for the meal. I have just returned home. Right now, I am secretly creating a Vocaloid using your voice!

“Ignoring the Vocaloid part, it sounds like Kiyomizu’s at home.”

Then what was that sound?

Gaboom, bang-bang, thonk.

Had a monster suddenly popped into existence? At this point, nothing could surprise him here in the Empire. Wearing only his pajamas, he went in search of the source of the noise.

“I’ll bring this broom just in case…” Still uneasy, he made his way up to the second floor.

Slowly, he opened the door—

—and there was Shiren, cleaning Ryouta’s room, apparently. That was his best guess, given the presence of the vacuum cleaner.

Shiren had her head stuck under the bed and was kicking her feet around. It was a very strange sight, and Ryouta wasn’t sure if it was creepy or just silly.

“Shiren, what are you doing?”

“I was cleaning, but…there was an accident…”

Kick, kick.

“Now I know where that noise was coming from.”

Namely, her feet. Their house was cheaply built, so the sound carried.

“I said I’d serve you today, you know, and I have to keep my word. I had to do something, so I started cleaning, and now…”

“You really went out of your way to do this for me, huh?”

A small smile crossed Ryouta’s face as he thought about Shiren’s eagerness, even if her efforts were ineffective.

“But you don’t have to be that meticulous when you clean. Just because

I'm injured—"

"I figured there'd be a copy of the *Kairakuten* comic mag under your bed, but now I can't get out."

"Why are you doing this?!"

"If it's not under your bed, then where are you hiding it?"

"I haven't even bought one!"

But sitting on his desk was an item that made him doubt his senses.

It was an issue of the aforementioned *Kairakuten*. With a bow on it, for whatever reason.

"What the hell?! Why is that here?! Is someone trying to bring me down with false accusations?!"

He noticed a message card sitting next to it.

> *Dear Ryouta,*
>
> *I was thinking about what I could get you to make you feel better quickly, and this is what I settled on. It would be bad if Shiren found this, so I have quietly placed it on your desk. Please enjoy.*
>
> *Tamaki Shijou*
>
> *PS:*
>
> *I've heard that a convenience store called Family Shop—tagline, From Elders to Grandkids—will be opening a new store in my neighborhood soon, so my whole family is filled with fear. No one in my family smiles anymore. To make matters worse, their mascots look like the characters of You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!, so they'll be holding a fair and selling Rouko meat buns, Sonko meat buns, drinks that come with figurines, and all sorts of merchandise… I don't think we'll be able to win this. In fact, I am starting to think there will be more beauty in our defeat… Oh, my postscript has gotten longer than the actual note… I'm sorry… I'm sorry…*
>
> *Please enjoy the book.*

“Shijou! Her little act of kindness is just making this more complicated! And of course Shiren would find it on top of the desk!”

He felt bad throwing out a gift, but that was his only option now.

“Grrr! I can’t get out! And there’s no porn under here!”

“I’m telling you, I don’t have any! I never did!”

“If you come clean now, then the charges against you will be weaker.”

“You sure are convinced I’m guilty, huh?!” He was shocked she could be so confident without a shred of evidence.

“Or maybe, don’t tell me… You’re only interested in men…or something like that…?”

“That’s what you’re assuming now?!”

“Hey, you practically have a fear of women because of how the curse affected you in Japan, right? I wouldn’t think it unusual if you started liking boys instead.”

“Look, I like cute girls. Nothing weird about that. But I can’t be friends with girls who’ve been brainwashed…”

He had dreamed many times what it would be like if he were capable of normal romance. In the end, he’d never been able to date anyone because of his curse.

“I see, if you say so…” Sounded like she finally believed him. “Then… do you…l-l-l-like some of the cute girls here…in the Sacred Blood Empire? …You can be honest with me; I won’t get angry with you…”

He had a feeling she was oddly close to the core of the question.

“See, as a girl, I think Tamaki, Sasara, and…my big sis are all pretty, right? So I was just wondering how that was all working out…”

“Uhhh… Well, I’m still thinking… Nothing’s settled yet, really…”

“Really really really really really really really really?”

“Why would I want to lie about this…?”

“Got it. That’s good to hear.”

He couldn’t see her face, but he thought he heard a sigh of relief.

“Ooh… Now that I’m calmer, I’m starting to see how dark and scary it is down here… I can’t see anything…”

Now she was feeling helpless.

Ryouta placed his hands on the bed to lift it up, but it was too heavy. This was going to take a while. “I’ll bring over the flashlight, so just stay there!”

He flicked on the flashlight and placed it to the side of the bed to brighten up the space underneath.

"There, you can see now, right?"

"Yes, it's brighter…… *Ahebajebafeyaiyaeyehebefajamefeni!!!!!!!!*"

She screamed in an unintelligible and possibly inhuman language.

"What was that supposed to mean…? That's like something out of a horror movie; good thing I knew it was just you."

"It's here… It's here…"

"What?"

"A roach."

Now he knew this was an emergency.

"D-don't move! Stay away! Go away! I'll give you anything you want! So get away from me—gah! Go away! Pleeeaaaaase!!! The cockroach is comiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!!!! Its antennae are going to touch meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!!"

"God, give me the strength! Just for now!" Ryouta immediately moved to lift the bed. He couldn't let his arms fail him now. "Gaaaaaaaah!"

"Eeeeeeeek!"

The moment the bed lifted slightly off the ground, Shiren shot out from under it.

They just barely survived.

"Thank you… Wait, no, we can't relax yet! The bug spray! Where's the bug spray?! Don't let it live! It doesn't deserve to live! Kill it! Kill it!"

"Okay! I'll get the newspaper and bug spray!"

"Hmm? What's *Kairakuten* doing on your desk? Right there, in plain view of all things! You *did* buy one! I honestly thought you didn't have any!"

"How convinced were you that I owned a copy?! And that's not what we're supposed to be concentrating on now!"

"And it even has a bow on it. What is the meaning of this?"

"I'll explain later. Don't change the subject!"

—Three minutes later, they successfully dispatched the cockroach.

"*Huff, huff*... What a terrible battle…"

"Yeah…I really worked up a good sweat there… I think I'll have to take another bath…"

Both Ryouta and Shiren were out of breath.

"Ow…I put so much strain on my arms, they're hurting again…" Lifting up the bed had not been good for them, but that situation was an emergency.

"Are you okay?! Are you sure you'll be able to throw a ball again?!"

"Who am I pitching for?! I doubt it's going to affect my daily life. But it does hurt a bit…"

"Sheesh, this really is the worst…" Shiren's head drooped despondently, and she plopped down on the spot. "I was so excited to serve you, but I failed at everything…"

This was more of a shock to her than he thought it would be; she barely noticed her own pigtails spilling onto the floor.

"Shiren, your pigtails."

"I don't care. Leave them."

"…But are you sure the cockroach wasn't running around there?"

Shiren immediately leaped to her feet. "Three-second rule, three-second rule. I'm safe, right, Ryouta?!"

"I'm not really sure, but let's say…yeah! You're safe!" He decided to use enthusiasm to help the topic die.

"Anyway, enough about that horrible bug. I'm useless…"

But his excitement wasn't enough to bring Shiren out of her slump.

"Hey, it's the thought that counts when it comes to this stuff. Don't worry about it."

He felt bad about staring at her in her deflated state, so he found somewhere else to focus on.

"Maybe people from powerful bloodlines have trouble serving other people, y'know? You are the emperor's little sister, after all. Even if you try and stay quiet, your royal blood just bursts out and gets in the way, doesn't it?"

"You're putting way too positive of a spin on it, idiot," she snapped. "—That's why I'm going to ask you directly." She leaned back up against him and grasped his pajamas. "Ryouta…is there anything you want me to do?" she murmured, hesitant. "It can be anything. I bet you're exhausted, and I'll do whatever you tell me to do…"

"I—I don't know what to say to that…"

This was getting weird.

The whole situation was making him think they were almost like a

couple.

"I—I mean it… I'll do anything… I'll serve you… It's your loss if you don't say anything. It's not my fault if you regret this…"

"Yeah, but…I feel kind of bad asking my master for something…"

"Just…pretend you're the master now. Order me around…"

Despite her word choice, Ryouta could tell from the tension in her back that she was somewhat scared. She was shaking slightly.

"I know you have it rough right now… Tonight is special…"

"Don't push yourself. I like it better when you're just yourself."

"I'm not pushing! I'm always myself… But if I did give you that impression, then…i-it's your fault, Ryouta!" She whirled around to face him. She was pouting, still red.

"Why is it my fault…?"

"Because you're always going off somewhere."

That planted a seed of guilt in him.

"So I need to tell you I'm going to serve you, or I get nervous…you absolute moron."

Considering how hard he'd been working to help everyone else around him, he might've been neglecting Shiren because of it.

"Sorry, I'll be more considerate…"

"No, the past is in the past. So…what is it you want me to do for you? You have to tell me; otherwise, I can't do it…" Shiren's face reddened even more.

"You're right… Uhhh, um…"

"Say it! Spit it out!"

"Uhhh, uhhh…can you boil some water for instant ra—?"

"I have been *begging* you to tell me to do something. And I will not accept boiling some water for your instant ramen." She saw right through him.

"Then can you take over cleaning the bath for me aga—?"

"After all that, I will not accept taking over cleaning the bath for you again."

"Then what?!"

"I thought you were a good minion… You're supposed to understand how your master feels." Her fingers tightened in the fabric.

I guess I have to ask for something big for her to be satisfied…

What was he supposed to do? He tried to put the wheels in his brain into motion. But he couldn't.

He was so worried about Shiren that his head wasn't working properly.

He was practically blacking out at this point.

"Right…uh…————————————I want to serve."

"Mm, what does that mean?"

His body temperature was rising fast, and he hunched over. He could barely think.

"Hey, Ryouta, what's wrong? Does your stomach hurt? Is it your wounds again?"

"I—I—I want to serve. I want to serve my master so badly, I can't help it… Allow me to serve…," Ryouta murmured, practically in delirium.

It caught Shiren off guard, but her expression soon changed into a smile.

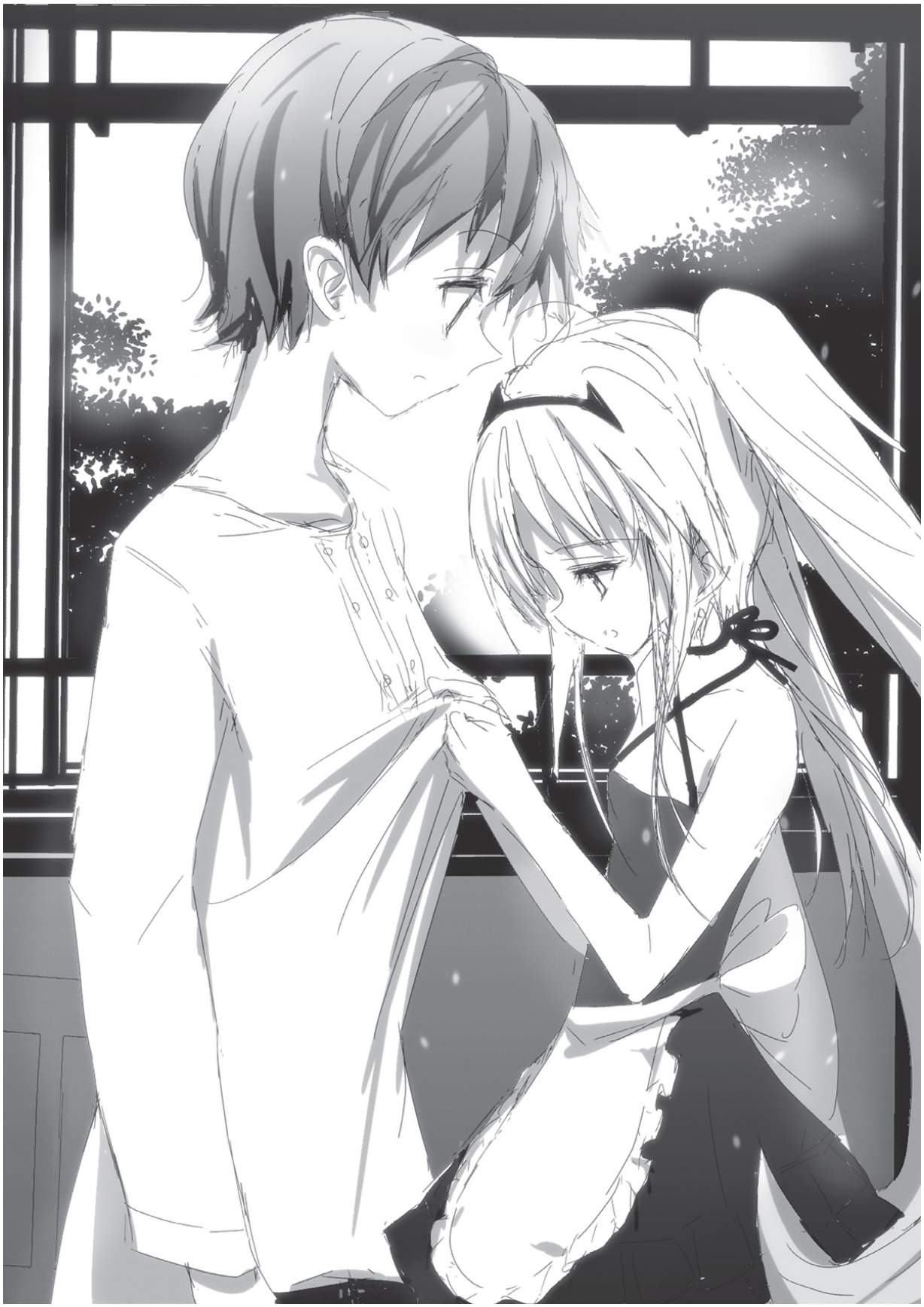
"You are the perfect picture of a minion, Ryouta. Very well. Serve as you like."

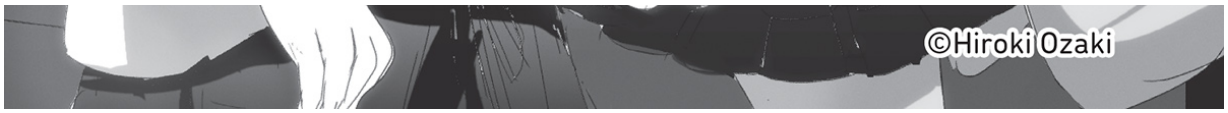
Shiren was almost moved by Ryouta's words. She had no idea that was the conclusion he'd come to.

"All right. I'm off to serve; be back later."

"Be back later? Where are you going?" That didn't make any sense.

"How are you coming back? You're already home. Oh, are you going to clean the bath or somethi—?"

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“I can’t take it anymore!” Ryouta flew out of the room and rushed down the stairs.

Shiren had a bad feeling about this and looked out the window—just in time to see him dashing out the front door.

“Hey, Ryouta! Where are you going?!” she called, but he didn’t return. “Hey! Come back! Ryouta! Ryouta, my minion!”

Her voice echoed emptily into the dark night.

“Oh, right.” Shiren recalled the strength of her own Sacred Blood—and how it was incomplete. “I guess…Ryouta’s not my minion…”

And that meant there was a natural conclusion to where Ryouta was going.

She felt a bit sad, but her feelings soon turned into anger.

“Ryouta, you idiot!!!”

Characters

Alfoncina XIII

The archbishop of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood who enjoys idol-like popularity throughout the Empire. She is a year above Ryouta and his classmates at school. Her real name is Matsuko Kimura.

Rei Asagiri

Ryouta's big sister. Her infatuation with her younger brother drove her to follow him to the Empire. She now works as a ninja for Ouka, the emperor.

Kokoko

The daughter of a god who had been enshrined in the Empire's mountains. She calls herself a fox, but she has rabbit ears. She works at Nine-to-Eleven, Tamaki's family's convenience store.

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EPISODE 2

LET'S GO AND SERVE THE MASTER!

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EPISODE 2

LET'S GO AND SERVE THE MASTER!

His legs kept going.

Ryouta felt like he was watching someone else run off.

What is this? It feels like I'm dreaming…

Either way, he couldn't stay still. Something inside him was saying he would be a failure of a minion if he didn't go to his master to serve them.

But who is my master…?

It didn't seem to be Shiren. She hadn't turned him into a Sacred Blooded even after biting him, probably because she was underdeveloped. Even though he'd lost consciousness the first time she bit him, it hadn't affected his body otherwise at all.

And that narrowed it down to just a few people.

Oh yeah, I think something like this has happened before…

The First Cathedral came into view. It was the main church for the Sacred Blood religion, made from a remodeled shrine.

He realized his guess was right, but he still couldn't fight against his instincts.

Let me serve you! they screamed.

Alfoncina was right there, strolling the grounds.

"Hmm…I really should put in a little break between jobs. My, my~. Having a role with this much responsibility is so tiring~."

Ryouta dashed straight toward Alfoncina in the distance. "Let me serve you!"

"Ah, huh? Something's coming… What is it?"

Alfoncina realized something was heading her way, but she seemed rather disturbed.

Most people would be frightened by a strange figure who was running straight toward them at night, screaming about serving them.

"Oh dear…a pervert…? Well, almost certainly a pervert considering

how he's screaming about service… Perhaps I should call the guards…" Alfoncina turned and ran for the building. "I can't get inside without going upstairs. That's a bother. I suppose that's what I get for using a former shrine. Oh, he really is getting close…"

The oddity was almost here; she was in danger.

Just as she climbed the stairs and was about to go inside—

"Oh, is that you, Ryouta?" She realized the suspected pervert was someone she knew.

"*Huff, huff*... Allow me to serve you…Master… I cannot find peace if I don't… *Huff, huff*..."

"Are you huffing and puffing because you've just run so far, or because you're a pervert?"

Ryouta, on the other hand, still couldn't think properly. But he did feel a bit calmer, now that the person he wanted to serve was right before him. "Huh…I don't feel as feverish anymore… P-please let me serve you…"

"Oh, I see~. I see what's going on~." Alfoncina had pieced together the situation. "Oh dear, this is no good… I have to fix this; otherwise, Shiren will be angry~."

Ryouta sat crouched at the bottom of the cathedral stairs. Even though something else had been driving him forward, that didn't mean he was immune to exhaustion from running.

When he looked up, he saw Alfoncina standing at the top, contemplating him.

"I'll have to send you back to Shiren if I want to end this safely~. But now that you're here, I feel like I may as well come up with a reason why~. I feel like that is destiny… We are in a decisive moment right now…" Alfoncina placed her hand to her lips in thought.

Ryouta stared up blankly at her. He wasn't all conscious, so he didn't really register any of it.

"To be honest, I think you would be much happier with me than Shiren, service-wise. If the reason why you came here was a side effect of…you know, then it would seem like a coincidence… Hmm…," Alfoncina quietly mumbled to herself, torn between her two feelings. "But so many people would hate me… Well, assuming hatred would be the worst of it…"

Finally, she clapped her hands together.

"All right! This is when we turn to the divine!"

She vanished into the cathedral and returned moments later with something in her hand.

“Here we go~.”

She was holding two six-sided dice.

“What is that…?”

“Regular dice—dice that have been blessed. I was thinking we would have these decide your fate, Ryouta. Leave it up to the gods.”

“The dice gods?”

“Yes. You’ll roll both at the same time~.”

She cupped her hands around the dice and shook them until they were clacking audibly against each other.

“If both show a one, then I bite you. Anything else, and I won’t. Basically, there is a one-in-thirty-six chance of your fate changing, I suppose~.” Alfoncina handed over both dice. “Go ahead and roll~.”

“Okay…”

“The odds are so low that I highly doubt we would get that by accident~. This will help me make up my mind, so I think this is the perfect point of compromise~.”

Ryouta rolled the dice on the stairs.

“No…we really did get snake eyes!!! Are you being serious right now, dice gods?!” Alfoncina went pale. She never imagined it would actually hit that one-in-thirty-six chance… “Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale…”

She took two deep breaths, studied the dice again, and conceded.

“Well, I suppose the results are in, and I can’t argue with them, can I…? Ryouta?”

“Uhhh, I suppose… No.” Ryouta was still acting spacey.

Alfoncina went on to think of some rationalizations.

“Don’t hate me for this, Shiren. It’s your fault that you haven’t made him your minion yet… You two even live under the same roof…”

Rationalization number one, complete.

“Don’t hate me, either, Ouka. It’s your fault that you’ve left him alone… You’re the emperor, after all…”

She felt like she needed even more.

"And don't hate me, either, Tamaki. Blame yourself for not making him yours when you were walking around together… That was your chance. You think you're an unhappy person, but maybe it's time you took the initiative to examine why that is."

And then there was Sasara, who had been through a lot recently.

"And don't hate me, Sasara. But it's your fault for canceling your matchmaking in your confusion… You could have slowly worked toward marrying him, too. You need to take decisive action when the situation calls for it…"

She briefly went through the rest.

"Kiyomizu will probably hate me, but no matter. And I hope Rei finds a compromise within herself. She's his sister, after all."

With that, she was done rationalizing.

She took Ryouta's hand.

"Come. I'll make you my minion."

She led Ryouta into the ritual space deep inside the cathedral. His mind was clearing up little by little, enough to realize that he was in major trouble, but he couldn't specifically pinpoint why.

He sat alone on the vast wooden floor.

"I'm ready."

Alfoncina entered the ritual space, wearing a luxurious ceremonial robe.

No one besides the archbishop was permitted to wear this outfit. It was made from thin, twilled silk, so the silhouette of her body underneath was clearly visible.

"I will now…commence the ritual to make you my minion."

"Okay…"

"Lie down. I will bite you first on your ear."

Ryouta obeyed and lay down on the wooden floor.

"If you don't like it, just say so. I think you'll still be able to save yourself. It will be too late in due time."

"Yes, Your Excellency…"

"I don't think you understand, but…ah well." Alfoncina had given up on a lot of things tonight. "Here I go, then. *Haum…*"

She bit down gently on his ear.

Ryouta could feel his body twitch.

"Your ear is so soft; it feels strange…"

Ryouta barely felt any pain, either.

"Next, your finger. I'm going to bite your right index finger, okay?" She took his hand and paused. "Yes, this is…rather embarrassing… Please, please somebody interrupt me… The ritual will be complete at this rate… I can't pull back now that I used the blessed dice…"

Ryouta's finger was enveloped in a lukewarm sensation.

"*Nom, lick…* You're a bit salty…"

Then there came a slight sting. Another bite.

"I want to stop here… Next is your arm, Ryouta. Can you hold out your arm…?"

"Th-this is kind of embarrassing…"

"Oh, you do understand! I—I can stop, if you want…"

"But this is for you, Master…" Ryouta wasn't totally back to himself yet, at least not enough to stop serving.

"Ooh…fine, but I'm not responsible for what happens, okay?!"

She placed his arm in her mouth.

"Ooh…the hairs on your arm are so rough; this feels gross…"

Monch.

Pain coursed through his arm. After it subsided, he felt like he was sinking into lukewarm water that was paralyzing his mind.

"It is much too embarrassing doing this as a proper ritual…"

"Master…your face is bright red."

"Yes, because I'm embarrassing myself…"

"But you have minions here in the cathedral, right…?"

"Well, I do in the sense that they've pledged their service to the archbishop, and some priests are only doing it traditionally. It's entirely ceremonial. This is completely different!"

"How is so…?"

"Don't make me say it…" Alfoncina pouted slightly. "This is my first time truly sucking the blood of a boy my own age… The last time was a joke, but this is different… I'm going to really make you my minion…" She cut herself off. "I have a feeling I'm going to lose a lot of friends…"

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“Why is that…?”

“Because I’ll be betraying so many people…” Alfoncina peered hard at Ryouta. “And that would make you betray a lot of people as well. I hope you’re ready for that. I don’t think you understand that in your current state, though.”

“I live for my master.”

That was what Ryouta genuinely felt in that moment.

Somewhere deep down in his heart, he knew something about this was bad, but it didn’t seem like that part was going to make itself known.

“In another moment, you won’t be able to take back what you said.”

There was a hint of defeat in Alfoncina’s smile.

“Next, your neck. This is the last part… If you want me to stop, now’s your chance.”

“Take my blood, Master…”

Once again, she inhaled deeply.

“Good-bye, Ryouta. In three minutes, I’ll be calling you Ryou.”

She then stuck her teeth into his neck.

“It hurts…”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“It’s starting to feel nice…”

“Then I’ll do things to you that will make you feel good every night.”

“Yes, Master…”

“And in exchange, you’ll protect me, okay?”

“I will be your shield…”

“And not just physically. Protect me from their grudges and hatred, too.”

“Yes, Master…”

“Ahh, this must be fate. In reality, I’m certain you would have been made someone’s minion a long time ago.” Alfoncina smiled, freed. “So the very least I can do is make your minionhood enjoyable.”

“Yes, please…”

“And then we can go to all sorts of places together. We could even go on an overnight trip together. We’d go to all the amusement parks in the world. And if you complain, I’ll blame you for teasing me like this. How could I hold myself back after going through all these preparations?”

Alfoncina slowly sucked his blood.

Typically, the act would make her drowsy, too, but her nerves made her

unable to enjoy the sensation.

Two minutes left—

“Stop! Stop it! Stop this!”

—and that was when a tearful Shiren burst into the room.

Her voice was mixed in with her hard breathing, which made her speech difficult to hear. Maybe she had run the whole way.

And yet her feelings had reached Ryouta.

“Oh, Shiren, why…?”

“Shut up! You know why! You’re not finished, are you? Ryouta, are you okay?!”

Words alone weren’t enough to ease her anxiety, so she went to embrace him. To her, it felt like they’d been separated for years.

But before that—

“You made it! Oh, what a relief!” Alfoncina suddenly pulled Shiren into a hug. “You saved me! I love you, Shiren!”

“What? I don’t understand! Damn you, Alfoncina, you were about to make Ryouta your minion! How have I helped you? Why are you thanking me?!”

“I’m so glad I don’t have to make him my minion!”

“And get off me! Go away! I’m not into this…” Shiren was clearly blushing from the sudden close contact. “Oh, that’s right. Girls can make other girls their minions.”

“Get those thoughts out of your head!”

“Why not make some great friends and work alongside the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood staff members?”

“You sound like a recruitment ad you’d find in the bathroom stalls of a cheap diner!”

She would hate to be turned into Alfoncina’s minion right now.

“First, you need to hold yourself accountable! Then we’ll settle this afterward!”

“Indeed. First, let’s have something cold to drink. I’m so tired…”

“Uh, I’m, uhhh… I’m sorry, I’m sorry… I’m sorry…”

After drinking some cold water, Ryouta came back to his full senses, then profusely apologized to Shiren, which leads us to the present.

“If an apology was enough for a crime, we wouldn’t need the police—but it seemed you were in some kind of trance due to your minionification…so I guess you’re not really responsible…”

“Exactly. I seriously don’t remember anything at all.”

“I guess I can let you off with three eye jabs later…”

“You’re not letting me off at all!”

“Of course I’m not! Look at you, leaving your master high and dry and then acting so indecent…”

“Oh, does that mean you wanted to do that same thing to him, too?” Alfoncina asked meanly.

“Wh…what are you talking about? Why would I evvvr whnnn…?”

The question was too embarrassing for her, and she faltered. Her face went so red, she almost looked ill.

“Wh-why would I ever?! I believe my relationship with my minion should be pure, so I…I wouldn’t…do that…”

“But even if your relationship is pure, you still have to suck his blood. You have to; otherwise, he’s not your minion~.”

“Well, that’s… Oh, I hate you, Alfoncina! I’m not putting any more coins in your donation box!” Shiren snapped, and Ryouta had to apologize again.

“I think we’ve caused you a whole lot of trouble today, so I’m sorry…” He bowed to Alfoncina, feeling like he’d crossed the line multiple times during that incident.

“It was a gift from the god of dice~. I was surprised, too.”

“I swear… Why did you end up making that one-in-thirty-six chance anyway…? I knew there was something about Ryouta, but he doesn’t need divine blessing for stuff like that!”

“I’m shocked, too…but I don’t really remember… The whole thing was like a dream…,” said Ryouta.

“I trust you’re telling the truth, Ryouta. I would be very upset with you if it turned out you were hiding something after all this time.” Shiren glared at Ryouta in a huff.

Apparently, she didn’t totally trust him, even though this whole ordeal had happened because he was already half minion.

“You may not have had full control, but I honestly don’t understand how you can suddenly run in the middle of a conversation like that! And to

Alfoncina, of all people! Was it out of spite?! I bet it was!" Her fist was shaking; that must have been even more humiliating than he realized.

"Conversation…? Sorry, I honestly don't remember."

"Oh—forget about it! The mood was totally normal, you know… As they say in English, *always air*…"

"I'm pretty sure that's not right."

"But you went too far this time, Ryouta. I know you might hear your master's voice in your head sometimes. But that desperate need to run off isn't a part of it. And Alfoncina wasn't forcing you to go to her, was she?"

The truth was undeniable; that effect was much too powerful for what it was supposed to be. Even as Alfoncina's minion, he shouldn't have been so freely controlled.

"Ah, I can answer that question~."

Alfoncina, a key witness in this scenario, joined in the conversation, realizing it could quickly become a scene of carnage.

"You better, because I have some questions for you, too."

"First, I am certain the reason Ryouta came here today was because of a side effect."

"A side effect of what?"

"The safety prayer."

"Safety? Whose safety?" This was news to Shiren.

"Shiren, do you remember when I came home before and you told me I stunk of incense, like I'd been at some funeral? That was it. I smelled like that because both Alfoncina and Kiyomizu prayed for me."

"Oh yeah, I do remember that day…"

"See, Ryouta, you were horribly injured in the battle at the mountain. You had a cloud of horrible luck over you then, enough to threaten your life. That is why I prayed for you in the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood fashion."

"It's true, Shiren. She was serious when she did it for me. She got angry when I said anything," Ryouta said, recalling what happened the other day. "When I was bleeding out and thought I would die, I heard Alfoncina encouraging me in my head, which pushed me to get through. Without her, I think I really would have died."

"Yes, yes. The prayer strengthened my bond with my minion, so when I felt Ryouta's consciousness fading, I came to cheer him on! Well?"

Alfoncina's show of pride was partially in jest, but she had genuinely saved his life.

"I had no idea… I know it's a bit late for this, but thank you, Alfoncina…"

"Ha-ha-ha, of course, we have each other when it comes to troubled times. I really hope you enjoy *YouRou IKou!*'s new anime!"

"Oh, yeah! I'm really looking forward to that!"

*Shiren started talking about *YouRou IKou!* for a while, so we have omitted it.

"So that's why personally, I'm interested in seeing how you're going to put Kanpiko in motion."

"Mm-hmm~. My policy is to include as many minor characters as I can, you see. I'm having a hard time imagining which ones will be popular."

"Yeah. I'd say that the side characters have more wiggle room when it comes to their plots, which makes them easier to deal with compared with the lead characters."

"Just between you and me, we'll be adding two anime-only characters to the show~. With my official supervision, of course. I figured fans of the original will have to check it out then~."

"That's kind of a gamble, too… It'll be a big chaotic mess if it doesn't go well…"

"But if the anime is made faithfully to the original, then it won't be as memorable as it could be. If we go for it and have fun with it, then even if it goes completely off track, we can treat it as a completely different work~."

"I guess anime has its own troubles. I don't really know anything about adapting things for anime, so this was informative."

"By the way, should we be standing here talking about *YouRou IKou*?"

"Oh, right, we were talking about why Ryouta came here!"

"You were talking about anime for over ten minutes…," Ryouta grumbled. He was starting to worry that they'd never return to the original topic.

"I think I've already given you the answer. My bond with my minion got stronger because of the prayer~. And since Ryouta had already been my

minion for a little bit, not serving me became unbearable to him."

"I see…so that's why it's a side effect…"

If Ryouta and Alfoncina had absolutely no master-minion connection at all, then he truly might have died back then. Only a Sacred Blooded master could cut into their minion's consciousness.

But that was also why Ryouta had suddenly run to Alfoncina's side.

"I was so shocked, too~. See, you know the saying—*when petticoats woo*, something something. Right? That's what it was like~. He came to me practically begging me to suck his blood. It was written all over his face."

"*When petticoats woo, breeks may come speed*, right…? But the genders are flipped here…"

"I was conflicted, too. I knew that if I finished making Ryouta my minion because of this, it would be horrible news all around~. But he came running the whole the way to me, which might as well have been an order from the gods."

"And so you rolled the dice, and it landed on one and one…" A cold bead of sweat dripped down Shiren's cheek. Had she been three minutes later…

"That's right. Those dice are purified and holy—once I made the choice to bring them out myself, I had to go through with the answer the gods gave me. It would be blasphemous not to believe them."

She wasn't allowed to test her god.

"Alfoncina, is there a risk of this happening again?"

In all honesty, this was beyond Ryouta's conscious control.

He had no confidence he'd be able to power through it if there was a second time. It was unclear if that was even possible.

"To put it briefly, probably. You could say that a tunnel has been opened," Alfoncina said.

"We can't have that!" Shiren leaned forward. "I saw it because he was right in front of me, which was why I got here on time, but if this keeps happening…he'll become your minion…"

"You do realize there's a possibility that I won't have him, right~?"

"How can I trust you? If I were you, I know what the outcome would be. If someone brought a full-course tomato dinner before me, I'd lose to temptation two, five times."

"Your example is hard to relate to…and you give in to temptation too

easily.”

“What?! Who could resist a full-course tomato dinner?! Then I should sit you down and talk to you at length about the wonders of tomato dishes!”

“No, I will have to impolitely turn you down. And you really would talk for hours, wouldn’t you?”

The Sacred Blooded did seem to like tomatoes, but Shiren was on a whole different level.

“But I don’t want to be subject to these side effects forever… I’m scared, too…”

Even if Alfoncina didn’t end up biting him, it would still be a hindrance on his life. Both Shiren and Ryouta knew they had to do something about this.

“If you remained with me by default, then I doubt you will be subject to those kinds of attacks!”

“No! That’s not the point, here! Ryouta’s *my* minion!” Of course, Shiren resisted this idea.

If their solution didn’t allow the two to live together, what were they even accomplishing?

“Hmm…if only there was a medicine or something that could reset a minion’s relationship…”

“Oh, there is a medicine~.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. I’ve never heard of one any— Wait, there is?!” In a flash, Shiren slid close to Alfoncina.

“There is a way to do so before a minion completely becomes a minion. There is a traditional Chinese remedy called *Jieyi* pills. It can remove a minion’s bonds.”

“That’s it! We can solve all this if we use that! Wait, hold on…” Shiren’s face clouded over. “But I bet it’s too expensive for us to afford, right? I see where this is going.”

“It is expensive, but it’s not unaffordable. I suppose its location is the problem.”

“Location?”

“No traditional-medicine shops in the Empire sell it, so you can’t get it here.”

“Which means… Right…”

The Empire population was only about fifty thousand at most, so there

was nobody who could practice traditional medicine in earnest.

"To make matters worse, there are all kinds of 'traditional' medicines, which means they only have small doses of things. You can get it in Japan."

"Oh no. That's too far…"

It wasn't far distance-wise—but it might as well have been.

Japan did not recognize the Sacred Blood Empire, which had unilaterally declared independence for their territory.

And that was why there were no diplomatic relations between the two.

Shiren's excitement fell instantly, and her pigtails drooped onto the floor.

"Hey, cheer up. I'll do what I can to make sure nothing happens like it did today," Ryouta said.

"Shut up… Say what you want, but you're going to go away again. That's always how it's been…"

"You're right… I can't guarantee it, but…" It was possible that this was beyond Ryouta's willpower.

""……""

Silence fell between Ryouta and Shiren.

"Good evening~. Agh, it's so humid~. I wish it'd cool down a bit. I almost want to charge the Empire's climate an inconvenience fee." Ouka sauntered in, almost like she'd come to visit a neighborhood friend's house. She had one thin cardigan over her pajama shirt, and unusually, jeans.

"Oh, good evening, Ouka~. What is it?" Alfoncina asked.

"You haven't submitted the international travel request documents for your trip to Japan this weekend, right? The deadline for that is coming up."

"I'm going to hand it in at school tomorrow~."

"You've told me that five times already. You always forget. So give them to me now. That would make it quicker."

"The emperor herself came all the way here to collect it… It's a commendable effort, in a way."

Typically, Ouka would have her staff take care of this. She was actually doing her job.

"Oh~. I do actually get paid overtime for this. Pay for my out-of-emperor hours is a hundred fifty thousand sacred yen per hour. Oh, and my overtime is covered by the citizens' taxes."

"This is turning out to be very expensive!"

“You know the saying: *The people’s livelihoods come first*.”

“That is not a saying, and it sounds super weak coming from you!”

“By the way, why are you here? Are you here for dinner? This is rather far to walk,” she asked, finally noticing the other two.

“It’s…a long story…,” Shiren said evasively. It wasn’t an easy answer to give.

Alfoncina handed over the documents, and Ouka studied them. “I actually haven’t decided on who should accompany me~,” Alfoncina mused.

“You’re just going to Japan; I’m sure anyone would be fine. With you in charge, anyone else is just a bonus,” Ouka replied.

As Alfoncina pondered, a light bulb turned on in Shiren’s brain. “Big Sis, are you serious about what you said?”

“Sorry, but taxes are going up. All across the country.”

“No, not that! I meant about the petition to go to Japan.”

“That’s right. Sometimes, very important people need to leave the country. What about it?”

“Can I go to Japan if I apply?”

“You can apply as much as you want, but you won’t get permission unless you have a very good reason. Japan has to give permission, too, after all. If you just want to go shopping, that won’t be enough.”

“I see… I guess that means we can’t go. I thought it’d be really easy to get through if you were the only one making the decisions…”

“That is a rude thing to say to your sister, Shiren,” Ouka retorted irritably.

Ryouta recalled the evening news. “Oh yeah, they were talking about it on TV today.”

The Empire and Japan were going to be negotiating something. Really, that wasn’t too strange. When two countries met, it was a given that the most important people would attend, and Alfoncina was the archbishop.

“Oh, I see~. That could work~.” Alfoncina placed a hand to her mouth and chuckled. “I’m taking someone along as one of my staff, right~? Why don’t I pick Ryouta~?”

“Hold on a minute! I won’t give you permission for that!” Ouka said, panicking. “You’re doing this for work! You aren’t allowed to treat this as a vacation, much less go alone with Ryouta… There is a hundred-out-of-

twenty chance of this being a mistake."

"Come on, you don't know that it's a mistake…and I think your odds are a bit *too* high," Ryouta objected for his own honor.

"What? That's because it obviously *is* a mistake. If Alfoncina were a cat, you'd be her cat food. You just know things are going to happen."

"Man, you don't trust me at all…"

"If there's someone I'm not trusting here, it's Her Horny Excellency."

"But he needs the medicine; otherwise, things will get worse," Alfoncina said before explaining the previous incident.

"Wow…I had no idea he was that far along in the minionification process…but considering how powerful you are, it does make sense…"

A Sacred Blooded's power depended on their lineage.

Ouka and Shiren had royal blood, which meant they could transform into a battle mode that made them look like the Goddess of Blood. Their power for making minions was rather powerful. Shiren couldn't do it only because she was still physically a small child.

Alfoncina had the archbishop's blood, which meant her own power to create minions was quite strong, and that power was greater due to her prayers and rituals.

"We really have no time to lose right now… At this rate, my Ryouta is going to officially be turned into someone else's minion."

"You're right. And it's not like Her Horny Excellency is going to hold back."

"What?! You don't trust me at all!" Alfoncina pressed both hands to her mouth. Apparently, this lack of trust was truly a shock to her.

"Obviously. Because if I were you, I would've made him *my* minion by now," Ouka said casually.

"Hey…what is that supposed to mean, Ouka…?" Ryouta wasn't sure if he'd heard that right, but he wasn't going to let it go.

"Oh… No, I meant if I were *Alfoncina*… I obviously can't be her, and it's not like I have any feelings on the matter… Don't make this weird, you fool!" Ouka protested, probably out of embarrassment. "Anyway, Kimura __"

"No! Don't use my real name!"

Alfoncina hated being called by her real name, *Matsuko Kimura*, presumably due to its boring and old-fashioned connotations.

“Why don’t you just get it when you go, Alfoncina? You could afford to send one of your other staff members to go buy it on the first day, couldn’t you?”

“Don’t you think it’s a bad idea to take rare herbal medicines through customs? And you know it can dissolve incomplete minion transformations, right? It’s something that would be extremely useful in this country. Wouldn’t it be bad if Japan took note of that~?”

“You’re right, it might not be possible… Then I guess our only choice is to have Ryouta accompany you…” Ouka turned to Shiren. “What do you think, Shiren? Do you not trust Ryouta and Alfoncina, or will you send him off and make him take the medicine there? Which is it?”

“This is difficult… I don’t think we can keep him this way, but I still think it’s a bad idea to send both of them alone to Japan…”

“Your options are rather extreme, aren’t they?” Ouka mused.

“I doubt this will happen, but…what if…nine months after the trip…?” Shiren trailed off.

“*What?!*” Ryouta interrupted. “You can’t just say whatever weird stuff comes to mind! I’d have to agree with you, though!”

It sounded like the other two were imagining the unimaginable between him and Alfoncina.

“They don’t trust us, Alfoncina,” said Ryouta.

“Indeed. I wonder if they’ll tell us that’s our own fault…”

The two suspects stood sadly off the side.

“But this means we do get to stay the night together~.” Alfoncina tapped Ryouta’s back.

“See, this is why people never trust you!”

“Enough, you two!” Shiren bellowed at them, her face contorted with anger. “Big Sis, they can’t do anything while they’re working, and it’s just one night, right? He could probably handle it, right?”

“You underestimate her. One night, and it’s over. O-V-E-R. Don’t underestimate her.”

“I want to trust Ryouta, but… No, I can’t. He went way too far today…”

After a very long discussion, they finally came to a conclusion.

“It is settled, then,” Ouka announced officially. “Ryouta, go to Japan with Alfoncina as her staff member. Then when you have free time on day one, buy your medicine!”

“Okay, I will…” Ryouta didn’t have the power to disobey her.

“And, Alfoncina, write your written pledge.”

And so Alfoncina wrote:

> *I, Alfoncina XIII (real name: Matsuko Kimura), will not, under any circumstances, take advantage of my trip to Japan to make Ryouta Fuyukura my minion. I swear this on the name of the Goddess of Blood.*
>
> *Alfoncina XIII*

“Is this good enough…?”

“Good. Now that you’ve taken the necessary steps, I accept. Even though this is still not enough to say we’re in the clear, I know there’s probably no other way, so I accept it with a broken heart.”

“Indeed. I am extremely, extremely uneasy about this, but this is our only chance. You come home safe, Ryouta!”

This sounded more like a last resort than he originally thought—but either way, Ryouta was now officially going on a trip with Alfoncina.

“By the way, Alfoncina, are there any side effects?” Ryouta asked. It was something he had been wondering.

“I told you, it was a side effect of the prayer that you came to me.”

“No, I mean of the medicine.”

“Oh, ‘side’ effects? Nothing at all~,” Alfoncina said. He thought he detected a hint of sadness in her voice.

Am I imagining things?

It didn’t seem right to press her for more answers, so he didn’t ask anything else.

I really hope death isn’t a side effect.

You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!

Interview for the upcoming anime!

Creator: Kin Hayashimori

Congratulations on the upcoming anime adaptation.
Hayashimori: Thank you~. I feel like I can finally rest~.

Let me cut to the chase: Is there any particular scene you want to see adapted?
Hayashimori: Let's see... There is a part in Volume 4 where Kousonryuuko speaks her opinions for seven straight pages, with no illustrations at all, and I would like to see that. I think it would turn into a ten-minute speech, which may be treated like a mistake, but I would so love to see it on-screen~. There are plenty of other things that would make it worth paying attention to, but I would love for the series to drop off everyone's radar entirely~.

I have a feeling I won't be able to publish this if you keep talking, so we'll end it there. I know it was short, but thank you very much!

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EPISODE 3

LET'S GO TO JAPAN WITH THE ARCHBISHOP!

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EPISODE 3

LET'S GO TO JAPAN WITH THE ARCHBISHOP!

Saturday morning, six thirty AM.

A fancy car with tinted windows pulled to a stop in front of the Fuyukura household, and Ryouta stepped outside.

"Good morning, Alfoncina."

"Let's get going, shall we, Ryouta?"

"Yes, I hope you'll go easy on me. Oh, I see you're wearing a suit today."

Alfoncina also had a purse with her, suggesting her VIP status. She also looked more grown-up than usual.

"I guess this is a very important mission…"

"It is, but work starts tomorrow. We'll be entering Japan a day earlier, so we technically have the day off. You wouldn't be able to buy your medicine if our schedule is too packed~. I just wanted to dress up as a cool older lady today! This outfit works in casual scenarios, too."

"You're right, I need to buy it today…"

He didn't know where the traditional-medicine shop would be, but he doubted it'd be anywhere near where the meeting was going to take place.

"*Yaaawn*." Alfoncina yawned sleepily. "See, I was so busy yesterday that I hardly slept. I'm so tired~. So sleepy."

"I know you've been working hard."

Between going to school, her job as the archbishop, and drawing a whole manga series, it was a wonder she had time for anything.

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“Oh, I meant in an unable-to-sleep way, not in an erotic way.”

“I didn’t ask anything about that!”

“Make the right choices, Ryouta!” Shiren called, still in her pajamas. She had come out to see them off.

“I know. I’ll be home tomorrow. Make sure you lock all the doors and windows today.”

“I trust you, Ryouta. And this is proof.” Shiren dangled a key in front of her face, then stuck it into the collar around his neck. “I know it’d be embarrassing if you went back to Japan collared. This is just for the weekend.”

“Thanks…”

“But you’re still my minion. Don’t forget that…”

“Y-yeah…I know…”

“Heh-heh~. Ah, to be young again~.” Alfoncina was enjoying the scene.

“D-don’t make fun of us… There’s nothing weird going on here…”

“And remember your pledge, Alfoncina. I don’t care what you feel on the inside; keep to form. Don’t let it affect your actions.”

“You don’t trust me at all~. I am the archbishop, you know. I am essentially a politician.”

“Who trusts anything a politician says?” Shiren retorted. A surprisingly sound argument.

“All right, Ryouta, we don’t have much time, so let’s get going~.” Alfoncina took Ryouta’s arm. She generally had no objections to physical contact.

“All right. We’re off!”

“Mm, I’m still worried…,” Shiren sighed.

But the car left her worries in the dust.

“By the way, where do you have to go for tomorrow?” Ryouta hadn’t heard any details about the trip’s itinerary.

“Tokyo, of course.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense. Sometimes they hold summits in other regions, though.”

The capital city was the typical place for international negotiations.

“And we won’t have any VIP reception. I am essentially attending this

meeting on my own, you know. I need your help carrying my luggage~."

"Of course I'll help. I'm going with you as your staff anyway."

The car quickly reached the edge of the Empire. They entered the border office, handed over their documents to the Japanese official, and were quickly granted permission to enter.

They were guided to the exit on the other side. One more step and they would be in Japanese territory.

"Here we go, to Japan~!" Alfoncina put her feet together and jumped.

"Yeah, I had no idea I'd be coming back like this…"

They'd only gone a few kilometers as the crow flies, but there was something deeply emotive about it.

"There, our taxi is waiting for us already~. We'll take it to the station, where we'll go the rest of the way by Shinkansen."

They managed to reach JR Oshiro Station without much trouble.

"Here, Ryouta, hold on to our tickets." She handed him tickets for the first-class car.

"Wow, I should have expected we'd be riding fancy… I've never taken one before."

"I do want us to have a comfortable journey~. Oh, and be careful of what you talk about." Alfoncina leaned closer to Ryouta's ear.

"Whoa! I hope you're not biting me again!"

"Quiet."

When she whispered to him, he had no choice but to stay quiet.

"See, it would mean trouble if people found out I was Sacred Blooded. So take care."

"Oh, I get it." Ryouta was not only in his home country, but also in an enemy country.

"But we're off today. Let's have fun!"

"Have fun?"

"Yes! This is my first time off in so long. I've been working nonstop for a while now~."

"I guess you have a lot of work-related things to take care of."

"Yes, *YouRou IKou!* has been positively backbreaking."

"Oh, that's what you mean!"

"Things have been awful in the lead-up to the anime adaptation… I think I'm rather confident I can fall asleep standing up now… Here we go~.

Let's go to the Shinkansen platform~."

They then boarded the Nozomi express train and sank into the plush seats, with Ryouta by the aisle and Alfoncina by the window.

"Ah, we're on an N700 series train~."

"I'm surprised you can tell," Ryouta commented. "I haven't ridden the Shinkansen in a really long time. I've never been to Tokyo, either."

"I see~. But Tokyo is so much fun~. Is there a reason why? I suppose high school students don't have a reason to go. It is quite expensive~."

"If I went somewhere with that many people…my curse…"

Just thinking about it made him shiver.

"Ah, right~. That was your curse."

Because of his grandfather's curse, Ryouta was so attractive to human women that it drove them mad—he'd been nearly kidnapped on multiple occasions.

"It has no effect on the Sacred Blooded, so I can live peacefully in the Empire."

"Peacefully?" Alfoncina asked genuinely.

"I guess I mean…*peaceful* may not really be the right word… I won't deny that." He had almost died a few days ago. "But there's an electricity in the air here that isn't in the Empire. Even when we were at the station just now, I saw people glancing at me… I doubted I was going to get attacked or anything, though…"

"Oh, I did notice the stares. I suppose that's your doing~."

"If you weren't here, I'd have so many people coming after me already."

"Gosh, imagine how cruel that would be to say to someone ugly," Alfoncina chirped. That certainly was an addition to this conversation.

"But it's true. I think you'll start to see it for yourself very soon…"

A few minutes later, the snack cart and vendor entered their car. "Lunch boxes, drinks, unique Shinkansen sweets, all for sale~."

"Oh, Ryouta, do you want anything?"

"No, I'll buy something myself if I really need anything. I put a lot in my wallet just in case."

"But you didn't bring any Japanese yen, did you?"

"Oops."

The currency of the Sacred Blood Empire was just Japanese yen with "SACRED YEN" written on it in marker.

“…I guess I could use it, but it would be embarrassing.”

Then the snack vendor came to stop in front of Ryouta, apparently sensing that he wanted something. She was in her twenties.

“Would you like anything?”

“I don’t think I’m going to get—”

“Then please have this coffee, on the house. And this soda, on the house. And this lunch set, on the house. And this ice cream, on the house.” She pulled out all the things in rapid succession.

“Uh…I’m not really going to buy anything…”

“It’s fine, everything’s on the house. *Huff, huff*...” Her eyes were turning red. “And here, a smile on the house! Tee-hee!”

“Th-thanks… Um, you’re blocking the aisle, so I think you should go now…”

“And please have my number, on the hou—”

“No thanks!”

“So this is your curse~,” Alfoncina remarked, somewhat taken aback by the scene.

The woman hadn’t tried anything else, so he came away from the incident with a free lunch. Unfortunately, this food had come with nausea and guilt, so he didn’t consider himself all that lucky.

“That’s how it normally is. Isn’t it weird…?”

“You’re right. It’s quite a high-level phenomenon. I’d say *curse* is an apt word for it~.”

“It really sucked. Even my family came after me…”

He wasn’t particularly fond of the memories this was dredging up. And there were way more than just one or two of those.

“I suppose you couldn’t find genuine love here in Japan like that. Poor thing~.”

“You’re right. Oh—”

There had been one exception: Ouka Sarano. She was immune, so they had been regular friends. Ryouta guessed that was why he’d been so attracted to her.

“Oh~? That tells me you must have had a crush on someone~.” Alfoncina smiled gleefully, as though she’d discovered his weak point.

“W-well, yeah, I am a boy. I’ve at least had that experience, of course…”

“Hmmm. Would that someone be Ouka Sarano~?” She found him out right away.

“Wh-why did you think of her…?”

“If I had to say, I’d call it a woman’s instinct~. No one would have told me personally or anything. There’s nothing to tell~.”

“Well, the way you’re phrasing that definitely makes it sound like you heard it from someone… It’s not like anyone else knows…”

He was sure the only person he’d told in the Empire was Shiren. But it was hard to imagine Shiren blabbing about it to anyone else.

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Who else was there? It was hard for him to come up with a list.

Did I ever let Ouka know? No, wait, that would be weird. It wasn't like I told her I had a crush on her in elementary school or anything. And she transferred not too long after that…

"Oh, isn't it just so funny when buttons are one place off their proper holes~? I wonder what will happen~."

"Uh, why do you look like you know the truth…?"

"No reason. It's fine; the past doesn't matter~."

"I guess you're right; it did happen a long time ago. Thinking back, I must have thought Ouka was so special because she was the only one unaffected by my curse…"

Of course, she would have seemed different; she was Sacred Blooded. Maybe he'd mistaken that feeling for a crush. Or if it was love, then his unique environment had fanned the flames even higher.

A part of him felt some measure of guilt about that.

"You could say that~. Who is it you like now, then?" she prodded, although he really didn't want to go there.

"Yeah, good question…" He always made sure not to think too hard about it.

"Who is it~? Tell me~. There are so many girls around you~."

"As of right now, I haven't decided. I don't have time to get wrapped up in romance or whatever…"

"What about Shiren? You live together~."

"I know people get the wrong idea sometimes, but there really is nothing between us."

"You seem close with Tamaki. You're in the same class."

"Well, you know… We're not dating or anything; we're just friends…" She did end up drinking some of his blood, but nothing had gone beyond that.

"How was your date with Sasara~?"

"That was honestly just a diversionary tactic to help Sasara… There really isn't anything between us…"

They ultimately managed to put off the deadline for her to choose a marriage partner.

That was when he got a text.

TITLE: You can’t not love Kiyomizu, Ryouta dearest!

He deleted it without reading the rest.

“I know there’s a lot of noise in the data, but basically, I don’t have anyone right now.”

“I see~. There’s no one~.”

He had a feeling he’d just handed her a weakness to exploit.

“Well, I am in desperate need of sleep, so I am going to get some shut-eye~.” Alfoncina yawned again.

“Oh, sure. I know you’re exhausted.”

Ryouta relaxed slightly, knowing Alfoncina wasn’t going to be teasing him.

“Oh~. And one word of warning~,” she said with a smile. “I’m usually very smiley, but when I’m woken up during my sleep, I get into a very bad mood. So please don’t wake me unless it’s an emergency, okay~? :)”

“O-okay…”

“In the past, I followed you because some people were joking that you were part of the Virginal Father~. This is how I looked then~.”

Her face suddenly filled with hatred strong enough to kill a small fuzzy creature on sight.

Ryouta thought of demons, or the villain of a battle manga.

And then her expression immediately transformed back into a smile.

“When they see me like this, the people at the cathedral tell one another to stay away from me because they don’t know what I’m going to do to them~. When I’ve just woken up, stopping me with logic doesn’t really help at all~. So don’t wake me up, okay~?” She smiled.

“All right…I won’t wake you up… That was terrifying… It really doesn’t suit you…”

“Oh, you know how sometimes, the characters’ faces in *YouRou IKou!* suddenly turn realistic? This was the inspiration for it~.”

“I really wasn’t expecting a behind-the-scenes peek!”

“All right then, night night~.” Alfoncina leaned toward the window slightly and closed her eyes. “*Zzz, zzz…*”

After about two minutes, she’d fallen asleep.

People who worked all the time would pass out in the trains.

She's sleeping soundly. Maybe this is the time for me to use the bathroom.

Now that he was thinking about it, he hadn't gone at all since leaving the house this morning, and he was feeling the urge to pee.

But then—

—Alfoncina leaned over to rest on his shoulder.

"Zzz, zzz… Zzz…"

The train had tilted slightly to the side and shifted her over.

She's not doing this on purpose, is she? She's just sleeping.

She was way too limp for her to be pretending, so she was probably genuinely asleep.

"Zzz, zzz…"

Her breath tickled his arm, which briefly startled him. When he realized it was just her, though, he held still.

This is embarrassing, but I'll power through it… I know she doesn't mean anything bad by it. And she said it'd be bad if I wake her…

Plop.

Alfoncina fell forward onto his lap.

She always has me around her finger, but right now, she seems almost helpless…

Her elder, more mature aura was totally gone now that she was asleep. Her face and shoulders appeared smaller than his own.

There was a sheen to her hair that made him wonder just how much time she spent taking care of it.

Oh no, I'm getting nervous…

He scarcely remembered it, but she had once leaned over him like this before, and he'd questioned if she was going to drink his blood. This situation made him uneasy.

I wonder how she did it before… No, stop thinking about that stuff!

He mentally collected himself so that his imagination wouldn't take off in any weird directions.

"*Zzz…* Ryouta, Ryouta…"

For a second, he thought she'd woken up, but she was just talking in her sleep.

"Ryouta… So…big…"

"Pffft!"

It didn't sound like she was talking in her sleep, and he almost spat out his drink.

Wh-what kind of dream is she having…? This is bad—this is really bad! I almost woke her up…

"It's so big… Skytree…"

Oh, she means the Skytree… I thought she was going to say something sexual to me again…

"Ryouta… So sharp… How inappropriate…"

He jumped again.

I really hope she isn't having any weird dreams right now…

And she was whispering all this from his lap, which made it worse.

"Akiba is such a sharp little city… There are so many porn shops; how inappropriate… *Zzz, zzz…*"

Oh, yeah! Akiba is the cutting edge of our generation! I think she's exactly right! I was getting the wrong idea, but maybe this is my fault…? Is there something wrong with Alfoncina…?

"*Zzz…* Ryouta… So full… Going to burst…"

He jumped again.

Calm down, calm down… There are a lot of things in this world that can be full…

"*Zzz…* The train going from Shinagawa to Kamata on the Keihin-Tohoku Line is at capacity. I think it's going to burst… *Zzz…*"

What, does she live there?! I doubt she's ever lived next to a train line!

"I knew it; it'd be easier for people living in Tsurumi to use the Tokaido Line until Kawasaki, and then transfer from there… *Zzz, zzz…*"

She's being so specific with her sleep-talking…

"*Zzz, zzz…* Ryouta, don't lick there… So dirty…"

This has to be unrelated… Just ignore it, just ignore it…

"*Zzz, zzz…* Oh, stop it… Everyone's watching…"

Okay, okay, just drop the punch line already…

Impossible things sometimes took place in people's dreams. But he couldn't completely rule out the chance that she was having an indecent dream.

The unease in him slowly grew.

"Gosh… You're like a dog, Ryouta… With all that licking…"

What on Earth is dream-me licking…? Not people, right? Right…?

"You can't do a tour of all twenty-three wards of Tokyo by licking the roads along the way! *Zzz…*"

What kind of dream is that?! he mentally snapped at her.

"Look, there's gum stuck to it. Oh, I suppose that's all right. *Zzz…*"

Dream-me sure is innovative…

Even though it was just a dream, he wished his dream self would have a bit more restraint.

At least let me complain out loud… This is really stressing me out…

And there was another element to this situation.

He needed to go to the bathroom. If he got up to leave, then he would have to move her head, which had a great chance of waking Alfoncina up.

I can still hold it, I can still hold it… I don't think we'll be on the Shinkansen for very long anyway…and when we stop at Nagoya, she'll wake up from the sound of people getting on and off the train. Then I can go…

"We have an announcement for our customers. Due to the strong winds blowing on the tracks, we are traveling at a reduced speed. We estimate our arrival into Nagoya Station will be about ten minutes behind schedule. We apologize for this inconvenience in your travels."

Now?!

Ryouta felt like luck had simply abandoned him on this day.

"*Zzz, zzz…* Oh, Ryouta, you wet yourself. How dirty…"

Seriously, what kind of dream is she having?!

"Oh, you always do baby play with Shiren, so you do this sort of thing a lot? But you need to be aware that most will see you as utterly depraved, and that it will have you lose all trust from the whole of society, okay? I don't think we can recover from this. *Zzz…*"

What on Earth is she dreaming about?! You can't just say whatever because you're asleep!

"What…? You want me to lick it? I can't do that, Ryouta…"

Come on, Dream Ryouta, don't make her do weird stuff!

"You'll pay me a hundred thousand yen? I told you, no… You're a deviant, Ryouta…"

Die, Dream Ryouta! Just die already!

"If you want, then you should lick it instead. Oh, you really will do it… That is gross; please don't…"

Die! I literally don't care if there's proper buildup—just have a fit or whatever and die, Ryouta! You have to, for my dignity!

Dream Ryouta was very quickly losing the right to exist. He was discovering rock bottom and still digging.

At some point, the urge to go to the bathroom came to the front of his mind.

What should I do…?

"*Zzz, zzz…* Did you know, Ryouta? That if you hold your pee for too long, you can get kidney stones more easily…? *Zzz, zzz…*"

Oh, sounds like her dream changed course, thankfully…

"I've heard that stones are among the most painful ailments you can have, and even female patients have said they're more painful than giving birth. Isn't that scary? *Zzz, zzz…*"

Then let me go to the bathroom, please!

"I see, even with kidney stones, you still want to be by Shiren's side right now. How suave of you, Ryouta…"

No, there's nothing suave about that at all! What on Earth is going on in her dream anyway?!

"*Zzz…* By the way, who is it you really love, Ryouta?"

Her dream had changed into something mean-spirited again.

"What, Shiren was just a toy for you? You'd never want a brat like her? You should be more prudent about your word choice…"

I'm turning into a villain!

"And Tamaki was a toy, too? It's easy to trick unfortunate girls with a little scrap of kindness? What did I tell you about choosing your words…?!"

It sounds like I'm turning into the enemy of all women here…

"And the same for Sasara? Prideful women are easy to drop because they haven't lost their naïveté? How awful of you, Ryouta. I wish I could execute you myself right this instant…"

He's just asking for death now, huh?!

"And ultimately, you're marrying Ouka in a bid for power…making cute girls wait on you hand and foot…? You are heartless, through and through.

Would you make me submit then, too? I think I would rather die at that point…"

Why is she having a dream like this…? Does she think I'm an awful person way deep down?

"Oh, it was just a dream. What a shock! Time to go back to sleep."

That whole thing was just dream-ception?!

He was starting to lose track of what was what.

I think I should just give up on going to the bathroom and sleep… At least it'll help me keep my mind off it…

He'd given up on going to pee.

I'll just close my eyes and sleep… One sheep, two sheep…

"Oh~. I won't let you sleep, Ryouta!" she yelled, and he jumped. She sure was attentive, considering her eyes were closed.

"Come now~. You can't sleep yet~. The night is still young~."

Dammit! Her sleep-talking is keeping me awake! I can't believe this…

"Oh, they'll notice if we make any noise. We don't want that, do we?"

What are we doing, and where…? I really need to know…

"See, the owls will get away if we make any noise. We came all the way out here to enjoy some night-critter watching! You can't fall asleep yet, even if you're sleepy."

Seriously, what the heck is going on?!

Afterward, Alfoncina kept talking about things that sent Ryouta's imagination wild as she slept, and he didn't get any shut-eye at all.

In the end, Alfoncina woke up right before they arrived in Tokyo Station.

"*Yaaawn*, that was a good nap~!" She outstretched both arms. "You know, I had so many strange dreams~."

"Tell me later. Sorry, I really need to go to the bathroom!" Ryouta ran to the toilet.

When they arrived in Tokyo, both of them could feel the attention.

"People *are* staring at me… I really wish I could do something about this curse…"

"Hee-hee, you're so popular~."

"That isn't funny; I mean it." He doubted he would be abducted now as

a high schooler, but it was still dangerous.

"I've actually come up with a way to make you a bit safer. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes, tell me! I've never been anywhere with such a high population density before…"

"I'll pretend to be your girlfriend." Alfoncina grinned impishly. "Wouldn't that significantly lessen the danger to you?"

"Well, that's… I dunno…"

Even though it was just pretend at most, it was hard to ask her to do so outright.

"But if I act like a stranger toward you in this crowd, then you'll have people hitting on you, isn't that right~? Wouldn't that be even worse~?"

"Hmm…if you put it that way, yeah…"

"If you don't mind, I would act like a stranger~. I would happily watch and see what happens to you~."

"W-wait! I feel like you're just threatening me instead!"

"Then you need to ask me, okay~? Say *please pretend to be my girlfriend*."

"Rrrgh… You're above me here, and that makes this unfair…" But that didn't change the fact that he had no other options. "P-please pretend to be my girlfriend…" Ryouta bowed his head—actually, he more just let it droop. He hated having to do this, but this was probably their safest option.

"Hee-hee-hee~. Now let's find that traditional-medicine shop~." Alfoncina grabbed Ryouta's hand and marched forward.

"Whoa, whoa! Hold on!"

"Nope! This is our precious day off!"

"You don't have to hold my hand—"

"Aren't I pretending to be your girlfriend?"

"Oh, right… *Sigh…* I now understand why Shiren and Ouka were so on edge…" Ryouta's head drooped again.

Somewhere in Tokyo…

…the two had come to an old, sketchy-looking medicine dispensary on a street corner.

Outside stood a line of frog and elephant mascots. But it wasn't just one

or two of them—there was a long row of them for some reason.

“This place looks really fishy. Is it even open?”

“This shop is the Kiyoshige Matsumoto Pharmacy, a place known only by those in the know.”

“The name sounds like it’s been copied from another famous shop.”

“Yeah, last year, I heard they changed the name from the Haruo Fujiwara Store to this~.”

“It’s an old store, but they really did copy it!”

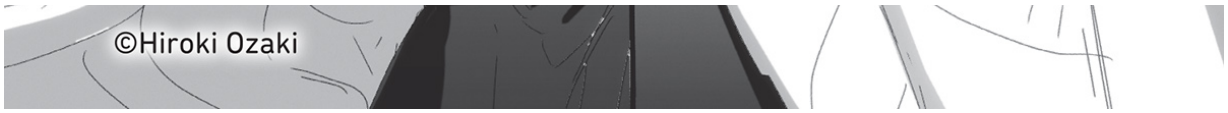
When they stepped inside, they found a man sitting there, wearing sunglasses, a mask, and a hat, reading the horse-racing columns in the newspaper.

This is incredibly fishy… Fishy enough to make me think this guy’s doing it on purpose…

“Customers! What is it you’re looking for? I got a shipment of good powder in today, heh-heh.”

“Powder? What kind of powder…? Nothing illegal, I hope…”

“No. Starch.”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“That’s not something you sell at a medicine shop!”

“We also got in some Hokkaido flour, pastry flour, hard flour, bread flour, fish meal, pancake mix, Parmesan cheese—we have all the powders you can think of, heh-heh…”

“Someone’s going to think you’re a smuggler and get you arrested someday…”

“So this shop specializes in powder~. But they decided to start dealing in traditional medicines as well, so they changed the name from the Haruo Fujiwara Store to the Kiyoshige Matsumoto Pharmacy.”

“Oh, so that’s why they changed from a ‘store’ to a ‘pharmacy’!”

“Exactly. And I wear glasses and a mask to keep the powders out of my nose and eyes when I handle them. And I wear a hat to keep it out of my hair.”

“Oh, so there *was* a reason!” It was inconsequential, really, but at least one of the mysteries had been solved.

“Some *Jieyi* pills, please, sir!” Alfoncina produced three ten-thousand-yen bills. It really was expensive medicine.

The shop owner brought out a box that was just the right size to hold a small bottle.

“Now that’s an unusual one you’re after today. This is all I have left. I don’t know when I’ll get my next shipment in.”

“What a relief~. I’ve heard there are only so many places that sell it~.”

“Oh yeah, make yourself a point card. You’ll fill it up with twenty thousand yen, which means you’ll get five hundred yen off your next purchase.”

“Never would’ve guessed a place like this had point cards…”

“You can also pay with your train card.”

“Why is that the modern part of this shop?!” The shop owner was a fishy man, but at least they’d gotten what they needed easily.

“Now your minion transformation will be undone~.” Alfoncina retrieved the bottle from the box and smiled.

“Thank you! I’ll use it right now!”

But as he reached out to take the bottle, she quickly pulled it back and put it away.

“Not yet. First, you’ll have to work off the debt~.”

“Yeah, I guess that was a little too convenient…” Ryouta was in no

position to pony up 29,800 yen right away, either, so he couldn't argue.

Plus, this was Alfoncina's first day off in a long time; if he didn't at least accompany her where she wanted to go, how heartless would that be?

"All right. I'll stick with you the whole day!" He made up his mind.

"Of course you will!" Alfoncina tugged Ryouta along by his hand again.

Her hands are so pretty…

Her hand- and nail-care were impeccable, probably because she was the archbishop. He wondered where she found the time for it.

"Right, first, let's go to a very quintessential Tokyo spot!"

"Quintessential Tokyo? Like Asakusa or Skytree? Or Shinjuku, maybe?"

"This is what I think of when I think of Tokyo~." Alfoncina had chosen Akihabara.

"Is this quintessential Tokyo…? Well, it *is* a sightseeing spot in a way."

He could see both Japanese and foreign tourists everywhere.

"It is pretty impressive with all this stuff around. There aren't even enough people in the Empire to fill up these streets."

"But Ouka did say she was going to build something like this on a smaller scale. In the future, she said she wants to have casinos, theme parks, and nerd neighborhoods in order to bring in the foreign cash."

"I wouldn't put that past her…"

Ouka struck Ryouta as the type to do anything for money, and he didn't doubt that intuition.

"She said we're going to make a lot of money because harsh pay-to-win tactics in games are allowed under Empire law."

"That's so sketchy!"

"I've also heard she's making knockoff stuffed animals of the mascots from a certain famous theme park~."

"Isn't the copyright holder going to come after her?!"

"She said, 'A person sound of mind would take one look and give up. But once you lose a few brain cells, you'll want to give it a try. I'm going to do everything I can to copy things that sell well!'"

"She's trying to make it sound cool, but it isn't at all!"

The phrasing had a dramatic sense of resolve, but the idea was cheap.

"And, uh, Alfoncina? Can I ask you something…?"

“Sure, what is it?”

“Can we stop holding hands…? I sometimes feel like the people staring at us are going, *Ugh, what’s a happy couple doing here? Go back to Shibuya or Harajuku or whatever*.”

It stung a bit.

He couldn’t do anything about the attention he received from girls thanks to the curse, but he felt like the men were glaring at him, too.

“What~? You’re being too sensitive.” Alfoncina drew even closer to him, until her chest was pressing up against him. That was definitely on purpose.

“Look, the people who come here are concentrating on their shopping, so of course, they’re not going to pay attention to every other couple they come across. The jealous ones are amateurs who have not yet reached enlightenment. I came here five times over every two days, so trust me.”

“That’s too much. People from the Empire sure like overdoing things… but we probably shouldn’t put on too much of a display, so let’s just—”

“Oh, I’ve suddenly been overcome by the urge to throw the *Jieyi* pills into the river~.”

“What?”

“Oh dear. That shop we just went to is out of stock, so it would be quite troublesome for you to lose them, but I’m sooo young and impulsive~. All right, let’s go to the Kanda River—”

“Fine, fine! We can stay like this!” He apparently had no other choice but to follow her lead today. He resigned himself to his fate.

“Good. I’m glad you understand,” she replied smugly. This was one of those times where being owed a favor carried its own kind of power.

“Why don’t we head into one of these stores, then~? I want to take a look at the manga~.” They entered a nearby specialty store called The Cat’s Hollow. Obviously, the walls were covered with manga and light novels.

“Oh yeah, I’ve never been in a place like this before.”

There were some manga-only shops in Oshiro, but he wasn’t deep into the otaku lifestyle, so this was his first experience.

“Oh, hey, they have the new volumes of *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!* over there!” Ryouta decided to let the creator know they were in stock.

But Alfoncina wasn’t next to him anymore. “Ah, I see, so this is what’s on the bestseller lists. And this, too. I think this one might be plateauing. I

suppose what's sitting over there is the extra stock. I'm not quite familiar with any of those titles there anyway. From the inventory on the shelves, I assume this is the next most popular."

She was very seriously checking to see what books were placed where and how they were selling.

"Um, are you doing a sales analysis?"

"I am. I need to note this—note, note."

She immediately started writing notes down in her phone, like a real pro. Well, she *was* a pro.

"Um, are you sure this is good data if you only see what's selling from one specific store?"

"That is part of it. But there are many things you will never know unless you go into the field yourself. Without any firsthand knowledge, you will start prioritizing your assumption of what is currently popular when you create. That means you will fall behind on trends and feel a bit pathetic, or you will end up sending products to stores that are out of line with the needs of the market. Your assumptions will always be different from reality, you know. Of course, you do need to use your imagination a bit when you create something, but when you let your imagination decide everything, you will end up making a strange product that is not in line with reality."

"Uh-huh…"

She continued her explanation with utter seriousness. "And I know this sounds contradictory, but checking only the popular things is a common pitfall. The outliers alone won't give you a picture of the whole, of what ties everything together. Or if you do find a common thread between them, then most of the time, you'll usually find that specific thread can greatly apply to things that aren't selling well, too. And you need to take into consideration the different publishers. Each publisher has its specialties, you see. It's quite dangerous to look only at what is doing well and ignore all these other factors. You'll end up with a survey that makes you feel better about yourself, but the survey itself is heavily skewed. It's better than studying only what is doing badly, but it's best to widen your scope."

"You sure are talking a lot all of a sudden, Alfoncina…"

The date-like atmosphere around them had vanished, too.

"Oh, Ryouta, can you buy one copy each of all the books that are ranked one to ten in the *doujinshi* corner? Here, use this." She thrust a ten-

thousand-yen bill at him.

"Uhhh, where's the *doujinshi* corner…?"

"Ask a staff member."

"All right!"

And so Ryouta ended up going upstairs and buying a bunch of *doujinshi*. He really felt like her attendant.

"*Phew…* Wow, going to a real store is a learning experience~. I feel like I've leveled up here~."

"I'm kind of tired…"

The trip had given Alfoncina a shot in the arm, while Ryouta was just feeling drained. Maybe that was the difference between nerds and non-nerds.

Grrrrrrowl.

Ryouta's stomach rumbled out of exhaustion.

"Oh, that's right, it's past twelve. Shall we have lunch?"

"Yeah… Oh, I'll pay you afterward, so—"

"I know a good place, so why don't we go there? Taxi!" She raised her hand to hail a taxi.

"Wait…do high schoolers use taxis?" Ryouta was getting some culture shock.

"Of course. Better not to waste time. Driver, take us to Ningyo-cho, please~."

They arrived in Ningyo-cho almost right away, given how close it was to Akihabara. They came to a stop before an establishment that could have been around forever.

"This place is definitely going to be expensive, Alfoncina…and people are lined up outside." Ryouta lived a modest life with Shiren, so this was far enough beyond his means that it made him hesitant.

"Why are you scared? Let's go in~."

"What kind of place is this anyway…?"

"They serve chicken and rice bowls."

"Oh, then I guess it won't be that expensive…"

"We'll be having the five-thousand-yen course."

"Five thousand yen for lunch?!"

Alfoncina called out to one of the staff members, "Excuse me, I have a

reservation under…K-Kimura…”

“You *really* don’t want to say your name, do you?”

Thanks to their reservation, they were taken to a room that looked like it’d been ported right out of an expensive *ryokan*. The place was entirely made up of private rooms, it seemed like.

“Oh, I’ll have a glass of oolong tea to drink. What are you having, Ryouta?”

“Uhhh, something cheap, at least…”

“Then two glasses of oolong tea to drink, please. That’s it for us~.”

“Uh, is all this part of the Empire’s travel budget?”

They were probably getting discounts, but he still wondered if this was okay.

“Hmm? Everything is coming out of my pocket. I’m paying for this trip myself,” she replied, somewhat bemused.

“Ouka hasn’t paid a single yen! And this is supposed to be work!”

He’d had a feeling she was cheap, but this was a shock, nonetheless.

“And with your pocket money, you’re paying for a lunch that costs five thousand yen per person (drinks not included)…” This was almost too much for him to process. “Uh…I’ll pay my portion of food later, so could you pick something cheaper…?”

“Aw, no~. You don’t have to worry about any of this~. How can we not spend money on our special trip~?”

“Sorry, but how much was the suit…?”

“Oh~. That was cheap~. One hundred fifty-eight thousand yen.”

“*Pffft!*” Ryouta choked.

“What’s wrong, Ryouta? Are you ill?”

“I’m starting to realize that money doesn’t mean the same thing to you as it does to me…”

If he bought an article of clothing that cost one hundred fifty-eight thousand yen using the Fuyukura household funds, then he’d get put in time-out.

“I have two T-shirts I use when I’m at home, and I got them both on sale for fifteen hundred yen…”

“You do wear cheap clothes, don’t you, Ryouta?” she said point-blank. “Do you want to go shopping later? I’ll pay.”

“Please, no! I mean it…,” Ryouta said, still choking.

If he let her use her money on him, he had a feeling he would never be able to refuse her again…

Afterward, Ryouta watched with disbelief as unbelievable amounts of money flew from one set of hands to another.

“The sweets here are so tasty~.”

“Uh…why does one ice-cream cone cost fifteen hundred yen…? That’s more expensive than a whole meal at a diner…”

After the sweets shop—

“I think this watch would suit you well, don’t you think, Ryouta? And it’s cheap, too.”

“How much?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“Pffft!”

—she bought him a fifty-thousand-yen watch.

And that was essentially how their night went.

Eventually, they sat together in Odaiba, gazing out over the water.

“*Sigh*, capitalism is terrifying… So is money in general…” Ryouta found himself exhausted by something even he didn’t quite understand. “Huh…I feel dizzy, but I haven’t been on a boat or anything… Am I drunk on money…?” After all, the whirlwind life of a celebrity would be too much for the mind of a commoner.

“Wow, I had a lot of fun today~! Thank you, Ryouta!” Alfoncina snuggled up to him. “Do you think we look like a couple~?”

“I’m scared I look less like your boyfriend and more like your sugar baby.”

Coming to watch the sunset in Odaiba seemed like a “couples-only” kind of activity, and everyone nearby was paired off.

“I guess I kinda *am* a sugar baby…but I don’t really have any other way to make money…”

It wasn’t like students were forbidden from working in the Empire, but it was a small country, which meant there weren’t a lot of high-paying options.

“I think if we make Ouka an exception, you might be the richest person

in the Empire, Alfoncina…”

There was no way for him to know how much, but he was certain that *YouRou IKou!* was bringing in the dough.

And I bet there are people who’d want to be her sugar baby in the Empire, too…

Then a question suddenly came to mind. “Oh yeah, why don’t you get a boyfriend?”

The reason he worded it the way he did was because he knew if she wanted one, she could easily find someone.

“Hmm~. I’ve never dated anyone before, so I don’t know.”

“No way, you’re kidding me.”

That was hard to believe.

“Oh, how mean! I’m not kidding you! I was so busy with lessons in elementary and middle school that I had no time for boys…”

“I see… What kind of lessons were you going to?”

“Oh, calligraphy. Swimming. Ballet. And I had to study the teachings of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, too.”

“Wow, ballet… You really are like nobility…”

“I also learned how to draw manga, went to creative-writing classes, and took classical Chinese lessons…”

“I see where *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!* came from!”

Her lessons had neatly led to her work.

“And then tennis. Golf. Detective training. Debate club. Equestrianism. Model government… I forget the rest.”

Sometimes, Ryouta had trouble believing Sasara was from a noble family, but Alfoncina was certainly the real deal.

“So that’s why I never had friends~,” she said, as if it was nothing.

“What…? But you’re so cheery all the time…”

She didn’t seem like the loner type.

“Oh, I wasn’t bullied or anything like that. I suppose people kept their distance out of respect? They sensed the *step off* aura, or so they told me.”

“I guess I get that…”

Few guys could muster the strength to ask out such a prim and proper young lady.

If Ryouta were her classmate, he’d probably stay away, too.

“Even the other girls were too scared to talk to me~. Oh, these aren’t

painful memories or anything, so don't worry too much about it," Alfoncina assured him, and her expression was, indeed, unclouded. "I was ready for all this—I lived knowing that would happen, I suppose, so it didn't hurt at all. Even with your curse, you've managed to survive, right? Everyone's definition of common sense is just slightly different from everyone else's."

"Yeah, I sometimes wonder what 'normal' really is." Ryouta's life was far removed from someone else's definition of "normal."

"That's right. And my normal was one without any friends." Alfoncina paused, as though she was ruminating on something. "But I had a lot of fun when I met Ouka~. It felt like I'd finally met someone I could get along with who came from similar circumstances."

"I guess you are archbishop and emperor, after all."

Ryouta was starting to understand why they were running the Empire as friends.

Only special people could understand how it felt to be in their position. Most people didn't live in the world these two did.

"That's why I've decided to give it my all as archbishop while Ouka does what she can as emperor. She tends to keep to herself~."

Ryouta cracked a small smile. "That's right. She talks big talk, but she's so sensitive. She'd get mad at me if I said that to her, though."

Had he ever spoken about Ouka like this before? He and Alfoncina could be friends for a long time, he felt.

"Yes~. You could say she sends mixed messages. I always need to come in and support her; otherwise, things could get bad for her~."

"Then you'll have to keep supporting her."

"Indeed. That's why I'm hoping *we'll get through our work tomorrow safely~*."

There was something ominous about what she said.

Was the next day going to be that dangerous? No, it couldn't be. It was just supposed to be a meeting.

"It will be like a battle, in a way. We have to stay on guard~."

"Uh, so tomorrow, what—?"

"All right, I think it's time we head to our hotel!" Alfoncina smiled, dispelling the foreboding aura.

Ryouta couldn't ask about work when she smiled like that. "You're right, let's go."

“Yeah. Thank you so much for everything today, Ryouta. I had a lot of fun on our date,” Alfoncina said sheepishly. “Even though I’d been to all the places we visited already, going with you made them feel fresher, more special… Truly, thank you.”

“No, I was just following you… Sorry I was useless…” Ryouta fidgeted, too, after that point-blank compliment.

“If only our next date was a real one… I’m not comfortable with them yet, so I’m not sure how it’ll turn out…”

“You can’t just shift the topic in that direction…”

“Let’s get to the hotel, then…”

“O-oh, sure… Yeah…”

Both with awkward smiles, the two made their way toward their lodgings for the night.

You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!

Celebrating the Anime! Q&A with Rouko!

"I've got sixty-five questions here for you, Rouko, so I'd like you to answer them. Let's do a rapid-fire question and answer session to get through them all, okay?"

".....Okay."

"From Saitama, I Raised Kimiko asks, 'Is it true that you don't typically wear a bra or panties under your uniform for environmental reasons?' Wow, our first question gets right to it, huh?"

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.....No."

"Answer faster! We're out of page space now!"

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EPISODE 4

LET'S STAY AT A HOTEL IN TOKYO!

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EPISODE 4

LET'S STAY AT A HOTEL IN TOKYO!

"I'm nervous… I'm so, so nervous…"

"Shiren, you've been talking about how nervous you are for I don't know how long."

"That's because I *am* nervous, Big Sis. Really, unbelievably nervous…"

They sat in one of the Empire's chain bars, Bura-Bura. The chain ran four locations: the main establishment, the Old Akinomiya Station bar, the downtown bar, and the castle bar. The reason it had taken up a spot in the Imperial castle was because Ouka had apparently lent out a part of the building in order to raise money.

Here, in the castle bar, sat Shiren, Ouka (accompanied by Sasara), and Tamaki (accompanied by Kokoko).

They had invited Kiyomizu along as well, but she told them that she was too busy praying for Ryouta's safety and cursing Alfoncina to come along.

Rei had tripped and fallen from a bridge into a river, so she was on her way to the hospital. Her injuries might have been life-threatening, but no one was worried since they all expected her to recover anyway, which was why no one contacted her little brother.

"That snake of a woman and Ryouta are staying overnight together!! *Something's* going to happen! It's even weirder that his sister is totally cool about it!"

"Worrying about this now isn't going to help you one bit. Here, have some more oolong tea. If you need a refill, just ask. Everything here is two hundred eighty yen."

"Ha! Like I'm in the mood to eat or drink anything at all! Oh, waiter! Can I have a fried egg and a buttered potato and a sardine salad and pickles with some extra pork kimchi?! Oh, and some yakitori with the skin on!"

"You're eating plenty."

"This is stress eating… 'Cause I'm stressed."

“Still, the food here tastes cheap… Well, it’s not as though I hate second-rate cuisine, but it doesn’t seem they’re pursuing better flavors, like ramen does…” Sasara wasn’t eating much.

“What were you expecting? Everything is two hundred eighty yen. You need to come down to the commoners’ level sometimes. Luxury is the enemy. Practice simplicity. Those who do not work do not eat. When in an all-you-can-drink situation, you must drink your money’s worth.” Ouka came up with a random assortment of wise-sounding phrases.

“Incredible, Lady Ouka! So many proverbs!”

“Oh, they’re nothing.” And indeed, they literally were nothing.

“Lady Ouka, shall we go get ramen for round two to wrap up this gathering? I know it’s not a good thing to have more ramen on an empty stomach, but I know a place that serves the most refreshing bowl. It’s an entirely new sensation, this salad-style ramen…and then when we’re tired afterward, we can make a quick stop at a hotel—”

“And, Shiren, I think you’re just scared because you don’t know what Alfoncina is really like,” Ouka interrupted, completely ignoring Sasara.

“What she’s really like? Isn’t she just all about money, power, and men?”

“That’s just a front. She’s honestly very pure, so I doubt things will get as bad as you imagine.”

“But she’s *actually* bitten Ryouta already! And she has a countless number of minions!”

“Oh, that’s because as archbishop, she needs to make subordinates. She’s used to biting, but nothing more.”

“What is that supposed to mean…?”

“That means her bites haven’t evolved into romantic feelings, and they never go beyond that. I at least haven’t heard rumors of her promiscuity or anything of the sort. He’s just an outlier. She has no other priests her age, and none of her minions are romantically involved.”

“Oh yeah, when I interrupted, she did say I’d saved her…”

Alfoncina had seemed considerably embarrassed when she was biting Ryouta. Now that she thought back on it, Shiren considered the possibility that Alfoncina might have stopped the ritual on her own, even if she hadn’t interrupted.

“Exactly. That’s why you shouldn’t worry so much about it. Even

though it is true that it's probably not safe to leave them alone together, I doubt anything untoward would happen so long as they're not in love. She does like to tease people, but that's only her persona. It would never be anything more than a joke to her."

"Ah, that gives me peace of mind." Sasara looked relieved.

"Why you, Sasara?"

"Oh… Well, I…I love you, Lady Ouka."

"Are you trying to hide an inconvenient truth with that comment?"

"No, everything pales in comparison to my love for you, Lady Ouka (*kashing*)."

"I feel like you're just using my name as a cover… I must say I'm not fond of that."

"What are you all worried about anyway?"

Kokoko, upon finishing her fried egg with mentaiko, joined the conversation with the tactlessness of a child.

"I don't see what any of you need to worry about, even if Ryouta's with the archbishop. So what if they're glued together? Or is Ryouta getting glued to someone else something to worry over? You people don't genuinely want to be with…*him*, do you?"

The air around their table became awkward.

Tamaki, who likely felt responsible as her caretaker, grimaced. "Um, I'm sorry… Please don't blame her… This is my fault… I neglected to give proper supervision… Ah…I suppose my judgment failed the moment I decided to bring a small child to a bar… Oh, did you invite me along today because you pitied me? Did you really not want me here…? In that case, I'm sorry I came along anyway… Next time, please tell me up front you don't want me to come… That would be much easier on me…"

"No need to apologize, Big Sis Tamaki. I'm the older one here. Oh, waiter, a *shochu* on the rocks, please."

*She is of drinking age.

"But even if you all did have romantic feelings for him, then a marriage would just be asking for trouble from a societal perspective. You're the emperor, Ouka; your social standings are too different. And rotten as you

may be, Shiren, you're still the emperor's little sister, so that's not going to work out. And it's only sensible for you to marry a nobleman, Sasara. Ryouta's just a fake noble, you know."

"Y-you're right… It's just as you say… I—I understand…" Ouka's lips were pulled tight.

"Ha-ha… You're a total brat, but you know what's going on…" Shiren was sweating in weird places.

"I do not even consider the possibility anymore…" Sasara's head drooped as she smiled.

"Let me say this as your senior in life. If you marry above or below your station, you will only find misery. Listen to those moments of hesitation. Marriage for love started becoming more popular around the Meiji era, so I've seen a lot of these tragedies."

*She is at least one hundred years old.

"Oh, please, Kokoko… You don't have to lecture everyone… Apologize to them…"

"And so if there is any one person who's the perfect fit for Ryouta"—Kokoko patted Tamaki's back—"it would be Big Sis Tamaki."

!!!

Everyone immediately turned to look at Tamaki.

"Um…Kokoko, please don't speak such nonsense… The only ones who would be a good match for the most ignorant of the ignorant of the ignorant of the ignorant masses such as myself would be crickets, pond bugs, and worms…"

"And he's not much different from a cricket or a pond bug. It's not like he has any other noble backups, and two commoners would find a whole lot more happiness than a commoner and nobility. And he at least has a hardworking core, so you can do some honest labor at the convenience store."

"Please… Stop… That's unthinkable…" Tamaki's face was bright red. She was thoroughly shaken by this whole ordeal.

"""""……"""""

The other three all wanted to say something, but it was difficult to argue with Kokoko's logic.

"Oh, and this is only if you really like that Ryouta guy, Big Sis Tamaki, but if you did, you could have some kids, too."

“““““Pffft!”””””

Everyone else but Kokoko spat out their drinks.

“Hey! That can only happen once they reach adulthood! You’re getting way too into this!”

“Exactly! Even if they are legally allowed to get married next year, she shouldn’t be having babies in high school! Society just won’t allow it!”

“This is a topic we leave for our second or third round of partying!”

“But considering how complicated the Shijou family homelife is, people would just blame that environment if she got pregnant in high school. And her family convenience store would be the one hiring her anyway, so it wouldn’t really affect her chances of getting a job.”

“Y-yeah…I guess you are smart…”

“What a funny thought, ha-ha…”

“I think we’re getting a little carried away here…”

“Basically, if you like him, ask him out, Big Sis Tamaki.”

“A-ask him out? I don’t know any date spots, so we can’t go anywhere… I could only take him on a tour of the best spots to commit suicide or a tour of illegal garbage dumps…”

Those sounded like awful tours.

“Still, it could work out. If you took him to the suicide spots and said to him, *Let’s die together*, he’d probably say something like *If we do anything together, I’d rather live*, and then you’ll get a flag for his route.”

“I-impossible…”

“Or you could talk to him for an hour and tell him exactly how awful your homelife is; then he’d probably say something like *Then let’s build a happy family together*.”

“No, no…”

“You don’t even have to go through all that trouble. Just tell him to come to the store and sleep with him, make him your minion, whatever. I bet he’d probably give up at that point, too. If you tell him to take responsibility for being your first, then he won’t be able to run.”

That was when a strangely violent miasma started filling the bar.

“Huh, I suddenly feel so much stronger. Like I could crush this wine glass with one hand…,” said Shiren.

“It almost feels as though you hate me now!” Tamaki cried.

“Oh, I know. I was thinking about making a convenience store–

exclusionary zone at 3-5 Chimatsuri-cho, and I'm tempted to go through with it," Ouka added

"Th-that's my address!"

"Lady Ouka, I was hoping you would build a dojo at that very spot, if you please."

"Y-you're going to shut us down!"

"I don't really care about politics. Hey, Tamaki, we'll always be BFFs wherever you move!"

"You're assuming I'm going to move anyway!"

It felt like an unfortunate slip of the tongue that was now coming back to her to put her in a detrimental situation.

"Um, um, um…can we change the subject? You know, to Her Excellency and Ryouta, for example!" Tamaki was doing her best to shift the conversation. Her store was in real danger.

"A-all right… Anyway, Alfoncina is a proper young lady, so I don't think she'll make any of those mistakes. And she's going to Tokyo for work anyway. She always gets the job done, so I doubt anything would happen to her the day before," Ouka said.

"Indeed…she is single-minded when it comes to any endeavor—rather, she strikes me as a workaholic…" Sasara acknowledged Alfoncina's work ethic, too.

"Exactly. You know Kouko in her manga, right? Kouko's so serious that she keeps failing. That's basically who Alfoncina really is."

"Huh, is that so…? I suppose I didn't read too much into it…"

Kouko was always trying to do things earnestly, but Rouko and the other characters never got the hint, which served as the basis for all the gags in the manga. At least partway through the run, Kouko became less of a main character and more of a butt monkey. She just couldn't keep from commenting about the others' antics.

"She really does only think about work, and she's never had any guy friends, either. So it's fine. It'll be fine."

"But you know the danger is still present, right? Oh, waiter, *umeshu* and water, please." Kokoko joined the conversation again.

"What danger could there be? I have known Alfoncina much longer than you have."

"The archbishop is earnest and hardworking and has no male friends,

right?”

“Yes. That’s exactly right.”

“If someone like her got to spend an entire day with someone who was essentially her first male friend, then wouldn’t she mistake her own feelings as romantic interest in him?”

“Huh…?”

“If she’s never really interacted with men before, then she may categorize all her feelings toward the opposite sex as romantic. Wouldn’t that mean she is more likely to lose control? And now they’ve gone alone to Tokyo, so no one can get in their way.”

Once again, the air in the bar froze over.

“And people get excited when they travel; that environment usually encourages the development of romantic feelings. Plus, they’re heading to Japan, a foreign country where she has no other friends. They’re going to be together the whole time. It’s like you’ve sent them off saying, *All right now, enjoy your new life together*.”

“W-well, that’s why I had her write a pledge, s-so there’s nothing to worry about…”

“Y-you’re right… You made her write that pledge, so there shouldn’t be a problem…,” Shiren chimed in.

“Lady Ouka, would you mind if you told me what it said…?”

Ouka showed Sasara a copy.

“So you had her say that she would not make him her minion, I see…” Sasara pressed her right hand to her forehead, as though she had a headache. “To be honest, this pledge is riddled with loopholes…” Sasara sighed.

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“Excuse me! Are you nitpicking a pledge written under the emperor’s supervision?! What loopholes do you see? Tell me!”

“It reads as though only making him a minion is forbidden, but everything else is fair game… If this or that happens in their hotel room, then so long as he doesn’t end up her minion…”

“Iiiiiiiiimpossible! Nothing sleazy will happen! Noooooooo way something like that would happen in one night!” Shiren denied the fact, nearly tripping over her own words. She wasn’t going to agree anyway.

“Still, we don’t know if it’s impossible or not. You’re not Ryouta or Alfoncina. People will do whatever when they’ve got momentum.”

“Kokoko, seriously, stop! We’re changing the subject! Why don’t we talk about shut-down bars in Nichome or something?!”

The gathering went rather quiet after that.

Ryouta knew this was going to happen, but the hotel was fancy.

“I bet it costs three hundred thousand yen a night to stay here…”

“No, it’s much more than that~.”

“You really are like a celebrity… I can’t keep up with your sense of money… I wonder what Shiren’s eating right now…?”

“I believe Ouka said she was taking everyone out to eat, so they are probably somewhere nice~.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Let’s drop our things in the room, then.” Alfoncina held up her card key.

“Good idea. Do you have my card key?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Oh, that’s for your room, right? What about mine?”

“We’re sharing a room,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Why…?”

“I was originally planning on taking along a female staff member, so I only reserved one room. And it would most certainly cost a lot more if I reserved another one~.”

“Yeah…you’re exactly right…”

“Oh~. I don’t mind if you take a room for yourself out of your own pocket, but later, you’ll have to pay me ba—”

“Nope. Let me stay with you, please…”

The most the Fuyukura expenses could afford them would be a three-thousand-yen-per-night capsule hotel.

“And you’re also like my bodyguard here~. I don’t think I’d want you in another room.”

“Now that you mention it…”

He was supposed to stay on watch to make sure no one attacked Alfoncina in the first place, not worry about her attacking him. Priorities and all.

“Th-thanks…”

“No, thank *you*, Ryouta. ♪”

Their room was located in the corner of the eleventh floor. They had a fantastic view of the city from their window—and one double bed.

This is definitely going to lead to some bad places…

Snap.

Alfoncina took a picture of the room with her phone.

“I’m going to send this to everyone to show them where we’re staying.”

“Stop! Please don’t! It really isn’t funny, so please no!”

The Fuyukura household could implode on itself; he didn’t even want to think about what would happen when he returned to the Empire.

“Oh, did you see the bed and expect something out of me~?” She grinned. She had guessed right, too.

“I’m not expecting anything. I’m worried…”

“Aw~. I’m not going to do anything to you, so don’t worry. That’s something I’d only do with someone I love~.” Alfoncina waved her hand.

“But you’ll try and bite me, right…?”

“I told you, the archbishop needs people working at the cathedral, which means they have to become my minions. That’s why I’m not terribly opposed to the act of biting itself.”

“Oh yeah, you did mention that…”

Alfoncina had bitten people plenty of times as the archbishop. That was a requirement of her job.

“Of course, I would give you a different answer if you asked if I would be *embarrassed*, but it still has nothing to do with romance. Never fear.”

“Sorry, I’ll try to stay more levelheaded…”

“It is fun watching you react that way, though.” She chuckled.

“Laugh as much as you want…”

The more it bothered him, the more she pushed his buttons; he couldn’t let it get to him.

“And, Ryouta, you’d probably be okay with this kind of joke, right?” She sat down at the corner of the bed.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you wouldn’t want mistaken intentions to lead to any unwanted advances, right? If I didn’t trust someone on that front, then I’d change their rooms without question. At least, if I’d come with a cathedral staff member of the opposite sex, then I’d definitely get separate rooms~.”

“Oh, I see. So you feel safe staying with me.”

Ryouta hadn’t even considered trying anything. He might be single, but he knew better.

“It just goes to show how much I trust you. You should feel honored~.”

She was right; that did make the situation less unpleasant. Maybe this was better than her being on edge around him and casting him off to a separate room.

“All right, let’s go get dinner, then!”

The meal was yet another fancy one, although he should have expected it by this point.

They’d gone to the French restaurant on the top floor of the hotel, and every item on the menu was expensive.

“I’ll have a nonalcoholic cocktail, and… Ryouta? What are you getting?”

“Uhhh, orange juice…” He felt so out of place here.

Alfoncina, on the other hand, was like a fish in water.

“This is definitely the most expensive meal I’ve had since coming to the Empire,” said Ryouta.

“No need to be so nervous. I’m certain Ouka and the rest are having a wonderful meal together today, too.”

“Yeah. I hope they are. But the most expensive meals in the Empire are the ones with tomatoes…”

He hadn’t even imagined the girls at a bar where everything cost two hundred eighty yen.

Their drinks were placed down before them.

"Well then, let's toast to a successful day tomorrow. Cheers~!"

"Yes, I hope all goes well in the future."

They clinked their glasses together.

Alfoncina took a tiny sip of her cocktail and then gazed out over the scenery. "They're like twinkling jewels."

"Yeah. This is the best part."

The view from the top floor was breathtaking. Lights of all different colors glimmered, vying for their attention.

"You certainly can't see this back home in the Empire."

"Yeah, you don't even have any high-rises."

The Sacred Blood Empire was in a rural city called Akinomiya, and there were no tall buildings at all. Even the city office was only five stories.

"I do like how serene it is out there~. But it was only just founded, so we still have a lot to work on~. The archbishop's job is never done, honestly."

"Yeah. You really do have a stupid amount of work."

She was having a meeting with Japan the next day, too.

Ryouta had his hands full with housework, but he wasn't busy the way she was.

"Still, I enjoy it. You don't get a taste of these experiences in normal life, after all."

"That's true…"

"I had barely any free time when I was little, but I think of it as an investment that allowed me to enjoy myself now. It really isn't all that bad. I can totally power through it~. Although…" She sighed briefly. "If only I had a bit of happiness to go along with it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You were in elementary school when you had your first crush, right?"

"Yes…"

"Those are good memories, aren't they? I suppose those experiences are nice. You can look back and think, *Ah, those were the days~.* Even for the ones too embarrassing to think about."

"Yeah, they weren't bad at all. You're right about the embarrassment, though…"

He could feel his face go red when he thought about Ouka back in elementary school.

“I don’t have any experiences like that. Zero. It’s shocking, really. When my family lived in Japan, we were *actually* rich, so even then, my classmates treated me like a princess doll.”

Ryouta could see how lonely that could be.

Life had been tough with the curse, but it wasn’t like he didn’t have anyone to hang out with. He could get together with some of the other guys to play soccer or baseball so that he wasn’t completely on his own.

That was why he had a hard time picturing in detail the pain of the loneliness that Alfoncina experienced.

Vaguely, it crossed his mind just how lonely she must have been.

It might have been presumptuous of him to say he empathized with her, but picturing it was enough to give him some idea of the hardship.

“I’m not gonna say I get it, since I’ve never experienced anything like that myself, but I’m glad you made it through.”

“Yes, it’s been exhausting~. I probably look relaxed most of the time, but it’s mainly just a show.”

“I think that might be an exaggeration, but I can tell you’ve had it rough.”

That was when the appetizers came and reset the conversation.

“Oh, and I have a little request for you, kind Ryouta.”

“I don’t know why you decided to call me ‘kind,’ but go on.”

Alfoncina seemed a bit sheepish. “I need a lot of courage to say this…”

“What could you possibly need any courage to say at this point?”

She’d said plenty of things to him already that a normal person would need courage for.

“It might be a bit pathetic, depending on how you interpret it…”

“You don’t have to act so formally. I’m starting to get scared, too…”

“A-all right, I’m going to ask.”

“Shoot.”

“Will you be my friend?”

“Huh?”

“See, as archbishop, everyone keeps a respectful distance away from me. I have a lot of subordinates, but no regular male friends…certainly, no

one I can just chat with like you, Ryouta…" Her eyes were downward cast, partially out of embarrassment. "I really just want to talk about silly things like a silly person. I actually wish I could sometimes. I think I could probably work even harder if I had someone like that…"

Now that her mask was off, she seemed much smaller than usual. The dam had broken, and she kept going.

"I'm always doing my best on my own, but that's why I sometimes get very scared… Sometimes, I just want to throw it all away and run… Wait, why am I telling you all this…?" Her eyes started to fill with tears. "Oh…I didn't mean to get this dark… Huh, what…? Why is this happening…? Huh…?"

"A-Alfoncina, are you okay…?"

The uncomfortable, growing distance irritated Ryouta. The table between them, the calm atmosphere of the restaurant—it was all getting in the way.

But he had a feeling that he needed to ignore these obstacles to keep going.

He had to stand and go to her—

"Sorry, you don't have to get up. I'm fine now."

—but before he could do anything, she stopped him. She did seem much calmer than just moments earlier.

"Are you really okay…?"

"Yes. I wonder what happened. I rarely ever get so honest. Maybe it's because we're on a trip… Oh, I see." She pounded a fist into her other open hand.

"Did you get your answer?"

"When I'm with you, it's like I'm outside it all. Like I'm outside my own house."

"Huh? I don't feel that way…"

Instead, he was far more conscious of everything, which made it hard for him to keep up.

"Which means you're the one doing this to me, Ryouta. It's all your fault~."

"Whoa, hey, that's a false accusation!"

"And that means you have to take responsibility~."

"Stop with the misleading wording!"

But he was relieved to see that she's returned to her normal self, at least. It was time to get her back for how much she'd been toying with him.

"Oh, and Alfoncina, I know you asked if we could start being friends, but I'm afraid I have to say no."

"…Oh, I see. I suppose I'd be too much of a handful."

"No, it's because I thought we started being friends ages ago." Ryouta smiled.

"Oh…"

"So I'm not sure what you mean. We already are friends. We've already talked a lot about silly stuff, haven't we?"

Alfoncina widened her eyes in realization. "Thank you, Ryouta…"

She wasn't smiling.

He thought, considering all they'd talked about, she'd give him an immediate smile, but…

Oh, this is what she's really like.

He had a feeling this was the first time he'd had a genuine conversation with her. "No, I should be thanking you for inviting me to such a fancy restaurant…"

"Oh, I could bring you to places like this any time, you know."

"I'm glad to hear that, but I have to say no… I think I'd get addicted…"

If he started taking this quality for granted, readjusting would be far more difficult.

Each course came to them slowly, but it was obvious with every dish just how intricate they were.

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Ryouta considered himself a good cook, but he had a long way to go before reaching this level.

"It is fun to cook things yourself, too~. You can't find boiled taro and meat-and-potato stew in expensive restaurants~."

"Oh yeah, you're good at cooking, too… Honestly, when do you ever rest…?"

"I told you, this is my first day off in a long time."

Ryouta recalled her mentioning that. "I feel kind of bad that you have to spend it with me…"

"It's not a problem, so long as I get to spend it with a friend."

She'd called him a friend out loud—it was a bit embarrassing, but in a good way.

"It's an honor. And you know, I think you might think you don't have many friends, but you have plenty of people who'd say otherwise. It happens more often than you think." Ryouta felt like this was somewhat similar to Shiren's case—a negative character in the guise of a positive character.

"Oh~. I suppose a gigolo like yourself would say something like that."

"Gigolo? That's not what I am!"

"You might be the only one thinking that. The guys in your class are pretty upset by how many lady friends you have. They're all thinking, *Seriously, eff that guy*."

"What?! Give me a break… I can't take having so many enemies… Actually, no, we're not talking about me today…" They were supposed to be talking about Alfoncina. "You just need the courage to speak up. That should solve everything."

"Courage, hmm…"

"You should just ask people if they want to be friends, or if they'd like to hang out with you. I'm telling you, that will solve a lot of these problems."

"That is quite the hurdle…" She sighed.

"Compared to working as both an archbishop and a manga artist while attending high school? It's real easy," Ryouta said honestly. It wasn't something worth worrying over—that was why he told her with confidence how simple it would be.

"Eep!" Alfoncina's eyes widened. The noise she made didn't sound

intentional, either. “What an optimist. You really have a way with words, don’t you, Ryouta? I almost feel embarrassed just listening to you.”

“Well, I don’t know if I could survive life otherwise…” He would have crumbled into himself when he was living in Japan.

“All right, I’ll try to think more positively.”

“Yes! Best of luck!”

“But first, we need to get through our work tomorrow and then get home safely.”

Once again, a faint cloud passed over her face.

The course meal took a rather long time, so it was nine PM when they returned to the room.

“……”

“……”

Sitting in silence together was extremely awkward. Ryouta had to keep his eyes away from the double bed at times like this.

“I’m going to take a look for a gift to bring back to Shiren. Can I… borrow some money?”

His sacred yen embarrassed him too much to show to people, so Japanese yen was indeed functioning as a separate currency.

Alfoncina ultimately lent him a ten-thousand-yen bill. “And take the room key. I’ll be here~.”

He slipped the key into his pocket and headed for the souvenir shop.

“I guess I’ll have to go with cookies or chocolate… They’re so expensive…”

Considering how extravagant the hotel was, its souvenirs were priced higher, too. But gifts weren’t the only reason he had decided to come here alone.

He was going to call Shiren.

She was probably done eating by now, so he decided to tell her how things went today.

“Did something happen, Ryouta?!” Shiren shouted through the phone. *“Did Alfoncina attack you?! I’ll be right there!”*

“No, no! Nothing’s happened! And it’s not like you can get here anyway!”

There were almost five hundred kilometers between Tokyo and the Empire.

It was a stupid conversation, but they were both relieved to hear the other's voice.

Ryouta was happy he made the call, too. "We're finished eating now, and we're back in for the night. She hasn't done anything weirder than usual to me, so don't worry."

"I see, good… I'm relieved… I thought you were a lost cause. I was thinking about going to save you, even…"

"Yikes!"

"I barely ate anything; I was so nervous…"

*She actually ate a lot.

"What did you have, by the way?"

"We're talking about food again? Ah, some French stuff."

"Hey! How dare you eat so much fancier than your master!"

"Huh? I thought Ouka invited you out somewhere nice?"

"It was Bura-Bura, the bar and restaurant chain…"

"Oh…I'm…sorry about that…"

They'd gone somewhere much cheaper than he'd imagined, almost shockingly so.

"Anyway, I'm in the souvenir shop right now. You want cookies or chocolate?"

"Both."

"You really don't feel like choosing one, do you?" His only option now was to buy the cheapest portions of each.

"Oh, and there's something I need to tell you, Ryouta…"

"Okay, what is it?"

"N-no getting married to Tamaki, okay…?"

"Sorry. I have no idea what that means."

Is that what she wanted to say to him while he was off traveling with Alfoncina?

"Well, it's not Tamaki's fault or anything. She's a really great person, if you ignore the convenience-store troubles and her problems at home and her overly negative personality."

"Stop listing her problems—you're basically insulting her."

"But listen, just because you're in the same social class, that doesn't

mean you have to choose her to be your wife, okay? The power of love can carry you over the walls of the hierarchy. Don't think that running a store with poor sales is perfect for your level."

It was good to surpass the walls of the hierarchy—his traveling partner's face came to mind.

Alfoncina's had a tough time because of her position…

Why was Shiren talking to him about this anyway?

"What are you trying to say? What were you all talking about at dinner?"

"L-let me put this simply: Think twice before you marry Tamaki!"

"Wha—? I haven't even thought once about it!"

"I see—he can avoid marrying Tamaki by sticking with Alfoncina. Wait, but then there's no point! You idiot!"

"You're panicking! I haven't thought about marrying anybody, so stop worrying about this!"

But he heard Alfoncina's name, so he found her in his thoughts again.

Wait, don't think so hard about this… Shiren's just rambling again…

"I see, that's a relief…"

"I'm not even dating anyone, you know…"

Shiren's reply came after a short pause. *"Yeah…you're not dating anyone…"*

He thought he was stating the obvious, but for some reason, she sounded dejected about it.

"…Sorry, I know you only told me the truth, but I kind of froze."

"What happened…?"

"Nothing, honestly. That rabbit just got carried away."

Kokoko must have said something.

"All right, I'm hanging up, then. Make sure to lock all the doors and windows."

"Okay. And I have one last question."

"What is it?"

"What is it like being alone with Alfoncina? Big Sis said she's always putting up a front, so…"

That brought a slight smile to Ryouta's face. He had actually considered how similar to Shiren she was.

"Yeah, she reminds me of you."

"In looks, you mean?"

The misunderstanding irritated him. "No, how you tend to keep people away. All right, see you tomorrow."

"Yes, do good work."

Their call ended there, but what she said at the end lingered in his mind.

Oh yeah, what is our work anyway…?

Alfoncina was probably going to be having a meeting with important Japanese officials, but what was he supposed to be doing in the meanwhile?

Am I a bodyguard? But I don't have any weapons on me. Walking around with the Imperial Guard sword would be illegal, too.

He'd come all this way on the hopeful supposition that violence wouldn't be an issue.

I can't imagine that I'd be a part of the meeting. Will she use me for my opinions as a Japanese citizen in the Empire?

That would make him a very special person.

But I doubt it. I wasn't supposed to be coming to Japan in the first place anyway… It's probably a job more suited for a member of the Holy Church.

There was no questioning here that Alfoncina would be playing a main role in this job.

So maybe she didn't think it was necessary to brief me on what we're doing beforehand. Or maybe… I doubt it, but…maybe she can't tell me…?

He had a bad feeling about this.

He'd gotten dragged into all kinds of shenanigans in the past, and the feeling he had right now usually preceded them.

But I think Alfoncina would tell me if it really was going to be that dangerous…

He didn't go straight back to the room. Instead, as he wandered, he found the newspaper corner.

GOVERNMENT LEADERS MEETING WITH SACRED BLOOD EMPIRE OFFICIALS

DETAILS, LOCATION UNKNOWN, MOST LIKELY IN TOKYO

The headline leaped out at him. This was definitely going to be an important meeting.

He scanned the newspaper. The article supposed that the reason both the location and participants were not made public was in order to keep them from getting attacked.

It was true that the Empire's presence was not a welcome one in Japan. He'd heard himself that many strongly believed that Akinomiya should be taken from the Sacred Blooded by force.

That said, if the participants of this meeting were to be attacked while in Japan, it would be very bad news for Japan's international reputation. That was probably why the information was kept a secret—which was an obvious hypothesis, but that seemed to be the gist of it.

I'll just have to trust Alfoncina on this.

With heavy steps, Ryouta took the elevator back up, then opened the door to their room.

"Alfoncina, I'm ba—"

"Ahh, what a refreshing shower… Hmm?"

When he entered the room, there stood Alfoncina, buck naked.

Her proportions were honestly perfect—all the curvy parts were certainly curving where they ought to.

Oh, didn't she say she sold a swimsuit-photo collection in Japan or something…?

Gulp.

Ryouta unconsciously swallowed. She looked…so good…

I can tell by the steam that she just got out of the bath. I really got here with perfect timing— Wait, now's not the time to be thinking calmly about this!

"S-sorry! I'll come back later!"

Slam.

He shut the door behind him and sat down in front of it.

She was just…naked!

This was so awkward; talking about their itinerary for the next day would be impossible now.

Instead, the image he'd just seen played back in his mind.

She had such nice skin…like she just stepped out of a Renaissance painting… Stop, stop thinking about all this…

As he agonized to himself, there came a knock from the other side of the door.

“I’m dressed now. You can come in~.”

“All right… Um, you’re not going to surprise me by actually being naked or anything, are you?”

“I wouldn’t lie about that. I’m wearing normal clothes~.”

“And no bathrobes that barely cover anything, okay?” Ryouta was cautious, considering his past experiences.

“Aw~. I packed my own pajamas, so I’m wearing those. I brought them to a pajama party with Ouka once~.”

“That sounds like it’d be all right, then.”

When the danger was gone, he entered the room.

And there she was, all pajamaed up.

“Oh, you were telling the truth— Wait, are these see-through?”

They were pajamas in the strictest sense of the word, but they were sheer. Wouldn’t something like this be called a negligee or baby doll instead?

“Hmm? It hides what it needs to.”

Alfoncina, on the other hand, genuinely considered them pajamas. But except for the important bits, it was completely see-through, which really just made it lewder.

“A-Alfoncina, doesn’t it, uh…violate the standards of public decency…? Honestly, it’s kind of worse than being totally naked…”

“But Ouka wore this sort of thing at the pajama party.”

“*Pffft!*” Ryouta choked a bit imagining Ouka in a negligee. “Crap…I think I’m going to get a nosebleed. This is so stereotypical…”

“Hmm? You’re getting a nosebleed? That’s no good~. And I remember Sasara wore something like this that day, too. I think she was huffing over Ouka~.”

This time, Ryouta imagined Sasara in the naughty pajamas.

“*Pffft!*” He choked again. “Yeah, I think I’m gonna get a nosebleed…”

“I’ll go grab a tissue, so sit tight~.” Alfoncina brought the box of tissues over from the corner of the room. “Here you go. Are you all right, Ryouta?”

“Yeah, nothing’s come out yet, so I’m okay…”

“But it’s already too late once the bleeding starts~. You’ve been so strange, Ryouta. You’re getting all stiff and frozen in place~.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry…” For the moment, he had to get Alfoncina out of his field of view. “I’m gonna take a shower, too!”

He got his change of clothes and ran into the bathroom.

So it was *true that rich girls wear pajamas like that!*

His heart was still beating fast, but he took a deep breath.

That was dangerous. So much of this was dangerous. Sharing a room brought way too many problems, and now he was fully aware of that.

But she's still going to be there, even after I get out of the shower… obviously.

That truth alone brought his mood down. He scrubbed his head and body to take his mind off it, but the problem lay ahead of him nonetheless.

I just said we'd be friends, and now here I am getting turned on… First, I'm going to cool off while I have some privacy. Even though it's kind of warm here in the bath…

He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate.

Empty your mind, empty your mind… He chased his consciousness out of his head until his mind was totally blank and his self started to vanish. Just a little more, and he would be able to handle this like a wizened sage.

And so he reached a stage of clean, pure bliss.

—I want to serve.

Hmm? A distracting thought…

—I want to serve my master.

All of a sudden, the minion power started to take effect—very similar to the sensation that had overtaken him when he ran to the cathedral.

Agh, now*…? Why? Alfoncina's right there; I didn't think this impulse would come…*

But the desire to serve slowly started eating away at his rational brain.

Oh, maybe my desires as a minion started coming to the front because I was meditating…!

Ryouta was partway to becoming Alfoncina's minion, so the need to serve existed as an impulse deep in his subconscious. Then, after he had chipped away at his consciousness and surface-level delusions, his subconscious had come to the forefront.

Now that he thought back on it, he had been so worried about Shiren last time that his brain hadn't been working as fast as normal, so that impulse had taken over in one fell swoop when he ran to Alfoncina's.

Chasing out all distracting and worldly thoughts came with that risk.

I think I chose the worst option here… If I can just get my underwear

on…

He mustered all his willpower to slip into his underwear while he still could. And with nothing else on, Ryouta returned from the bath.

"Oh, did you have a nice bath, Ryouta~?"

"Alfoncina, let me serve you!"

The air in the room both froze with tension and turned extremely confusing.

"H-how are you going to serve me wearing that? …Oh." Alfoncina's face went bright red. "No, you can't! I mean it, no! I forbid you from giving me that type of service!"

In her shock, she curled up on the bed and hid her face.

"Just because you're my minion, that doesn't mean I need *that* much… I'd use that medicine to get rid of such a minion…"

A corner of Ryouta's mind understood that this was bad and told himself to calm down, but the minion power was winning out.

However, when he saw Alfoncina shivering on the bed, a weird switch flipped on in his mind instead.

"Master, please let me serve you! I will do anything, so please let me do it!"

Stop, hey, stop this! Just let it rest there! We won't be able to take this back if this goes much further!

"Ryouta, that's just because you're a partial minion, s-so please calm down…"

Alfoncina, just run—don't bother trying to talk me down. Whatever you say will only make me more excited…

"I am your minion…so…"

If only I'd known—I should have taken the Jieyi *pills beforehand!*

"Ryouta, you know this is against the pledge I wrote… Oh, I brought it with me, so let me get it out!"

Alfoncina fished around in her bag for the paper.

> *I, Alfoncina XIII (real name: Matsuko Kimura), will not, under any circumstances, take advantage of my trip to Japan to*

make Ryouta Fuyukura my minion. I swear this on the name of the Goddess of Blood.

She realized something.

"Oh…I can't make you my minion, but it doesn't say I can't be naughty."

That really isn't the calm analysis I need right now!

When she'd written the pledge, both Shiren and Ouka had been there, so they probably hadn't gotten into much detail beyond that.

"Which means…the rules don't forbid it… The rules say… What should we do, Ryouta?" Alfoncina asked, placing a finger to her lips. In that outfit, that questioning gesture made him think of a delicate doll.

Don't ask me! Even if it's not on there, it's obviously not okay! Please say no!

"I-I'm fine either way… Can you decide…?"

At that moment, he could feel his rational side trying to beat down the minion instincts.

"I-i-if that means serving you…"

C'mon, brain! Think! Reason! Win! And hurry up!

And finally, his instincts were suppressed.

"A-all right…let me take off my pajamas, then… Oh? Would you rather I keep them on, though…?"

"Pretend this never happeeeeeeeeened!" Ryouta immediately ran back to the bathroom and dunked his head into water.

"Pant, pant, pant…"

He felt exhausted.

"I think that's the most danger I've been in since moving to the Empire…"

Ten minutes later.

"Gosh, you really scared me~."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I honestly can't apologize enough…"

Alfoncina poured water from a bottle into Ryouta's glass, and he gulped it down. Best to cool his head along with his body.

"I messed up, and the minionification suddenly got stronger, and then

there was a misunderstanding on top of all that… What I want to say is that I think I'm okay now…"

"You're right. I don't think these fits have occurred in such rapid succession, have they?"

"If they started happening all the time, then I don't know if I'd be in my right mind again… I think it's about time I take that medicine…"

There was no questioning that it was much safer for him to not be a minion.

"But you shouldn't use it now. Look at this."

She took out the medicine leaflet.

HOW TO TAKE THIS MEDICINE & IMPORTANT INFORMATION REGARDING THIS MEDICINE

This medicine is very strong. Take after a meal. Do not take before going to bed.

"How dangerous is this…?" That warning label was not encouraging. "I should be fine for the night. I'll try it tomorrow…"

"Let's sleep, then."

"Uh…"

It felt weird hearing that from someone wearing a see-through negligee.

"We have an early day tomorrow, you know. Oh, did you misunderstand again~?" She grinned.

"Well, obviously… Only way to deal with this… I can sleep on the floo __"

"Oh, don't do that, Ryouta. It's not clean." She grabbed his pajamas.

"But sleeping in the same bed? That's…"

"You're my staff member on this trip, aren't you? Have some dignity~. How embarrassing would it be if you slept on the floor? So no! Sleep in the bed! It's a double bed, so there's plenty of room!"

"Rrgh…you're right… I understand what you're saying…" He turned off the lights and got onto the right side of the bed, facing outward. The mattress was big enough to allow quite a bit of distance between the two.

"You can come closer, you know~."

"No. And I know you'll get embarrassed if I actually do."

“Yes…I don’t think I want that…”

He had to pick out what parts of her were genuine and what was her acting—otherwise, they would both regret it.

This kind of relationship was perfect for them—a reasonable distance, a push and pull they both participated in.

“But if your rational side says you want something, you know, I don’t think I’d mind…”

“Huh? I don’t know—”

“I know boys can have urges…but if we acted on them, I don’t think I could call you a friend anymore.”

“L-let’s not… I don’t think that’s something people who are just friends should do…”

“Y…you’re right…”

They both took deep breaths to calm down.

Now that the lights were off, Ryouta figured it was time to go straight to sleep.

Rustle, rustle.

Ryouta could tell Alfoncina had gotten closer.

“Ryouta?”

“What now?”

“During dinner, you told me to be courageous and say things out loud.”

“I did, yeah.” He had told her that was all she had to do—a simple, yet effective gesture. “That way, your friends can help you.”

“So then what would you do if I gathered my courage and told you something?”

“Told me what?”

“…If I told you not to be my friend but my boyfriend, then what would you do?” she asked. Her voice was very small.

“Oh… W-well…”

“There are so many things I have to do, and even though it can be too much sometimes, I feel like I can overcome it all when I’m with you.”

“I-it’s nice to know you find me so reliable…”

“Well…? You said you didn’t have a girlfriend, right…?”

“You’re right, I don’t…”

“You don’t have to be my minion. I just want to be with you…”

Ryouta didn’t know how to respond. Neither of them was in a

relationship with anyone else, so he couldn't turn her down on ethical grounds. So while that was all fine and dandy…

"I'm sorry, I'm just really scared…of tomorrow…," she said. "It would be so much easier if I could be free from this pressure, and we could run away together…"

"Um, is it going to be that bad…?"

"If I asked you to throw everything aside and run away with me right now, would you come with me?"

The question was much weightier than a confession of love—and Ryouta had nothing to say in return.

"Then we'd never go back to the Empire; we'd live here as Japanese people. Then we could get married and make a modest but happy family. I sometimes think a simple life would be much happier."

"Um, Alfoncina…? Is your work tomorrow…really going to be that dangerous?"

A silence befitting the night fell over them.

"Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Until Alfoncina shattered it. Her laughter sounded forced.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Sorry, sorry. I was just thinking how flustered you'd be if I said that. Don't get the wrong idea, okay~? The whole boyfriend thing was just a thought experiment~. I didn't ask you outright if you wanted to. And all that about running away was a joke~."

"All right… You scared me."

"But it's still a little early; I think it'd be against the rules~. I can't say what will happen in two, three months, though~."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mea—?"

"I'm glad to have you as a friend right now!"

"Yeah, me too."

"And I know I should have said this earlier, but…please try to stay away from me…"

"Oh, so you don't actually like me! I'm sorry!"

"No, that's not what I mean!" The panic grew in her voice, and there

was a hesitant pause before she spoke again. “Right now, if you got too close to me…I don’t think I’d be able to hold back…”

“Huh…?”

“I would probably think, *I want to make him my minion, I want him to be mine forever…* Then I don’t think I’d be able to take it back… I don’t think I can win out over my own desires…”

Ryouta’s muscles tensed until he was so strained, he couldn’t move. All that passed between them was Alfoncina’s speech.

“When I rolled snake eyes and sucked your blood, I thought, *You know, I wouldn’t mind finishing this*… I was so embarrassed, but I was also really happy… I think I might lose control again in my current state of mind…”

“All right…I’ll be careful…”

“Good… Thanks…”

Alfoncina fell silent. Ryouta also decided he wasn’t going to say anything anymore.

He must have been a lot more tired than he thought, because drowsiness soon overtook him. He’d probably sleep like a rock—pass out, and then it’d be morning.

Or so he thought.

He thought he heard a noise.

Was it morning? No, too early.

He heard a voice from far away.

“I’m going out for a bit, Ryouta. No need to get up, okay?”

The voice was too quiet to wake him up.

“I’m going to work. It’s time to face the music.”

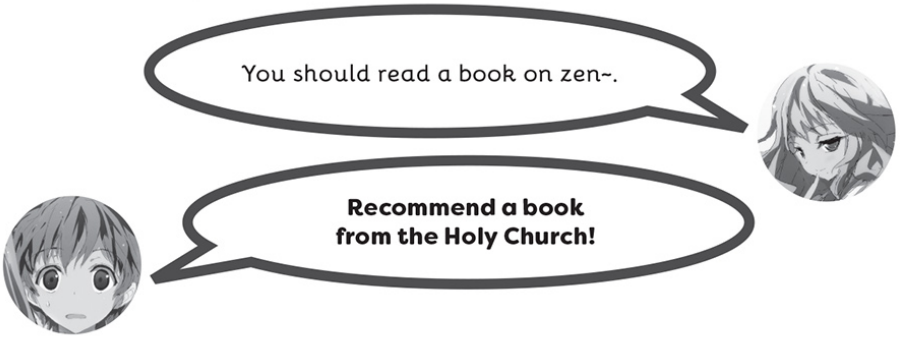
Yet what she said stuck with him.

“There are things I have to do. I have to draw the line somewhere.”

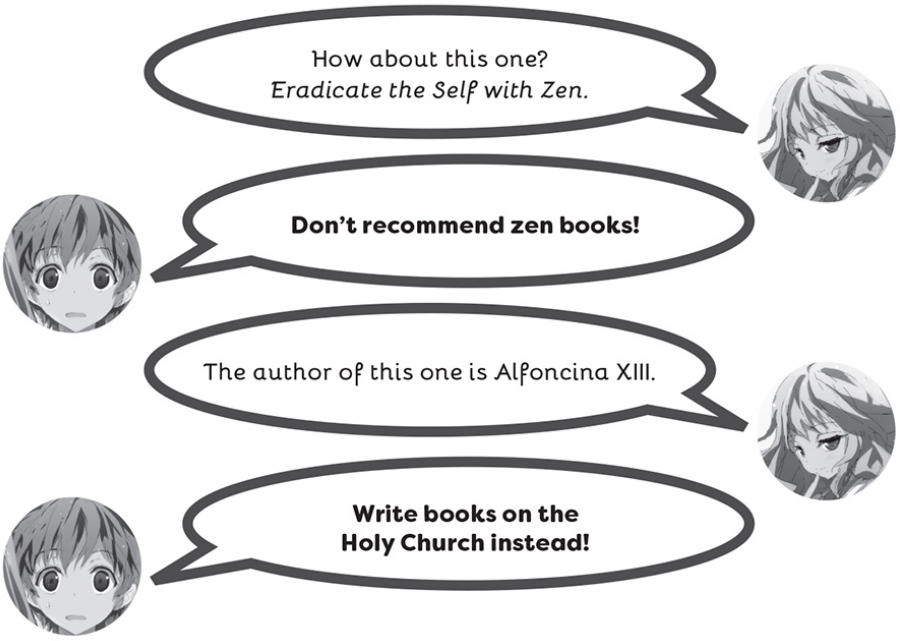
When Ryouta snapped his eyes open, Alfoncina was nowhere to be seen.

Life-Advice Corner with Archbishop Alfoncina XIII of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood #1

Q: I have recently been thinking about the meaning of life. Are there any books you would recommend on this? (From High Blood Pressure: 2-chome, Yoshida-cho)



Q: I've taken on so much debt that I'm not sure how I'm going to survive tomorrow. What should I do? (From Abolish Taxes: 1-chome, Midori-dai)



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EPISODE 5

LET'S SEARCH FOR ALFONCINA!

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EPISODE 5

LET'S SEARCH FOR ALFONCINA!

"Alfoncina?"

Alfoncina had vanished; that was all Ryouta knew. There were no other clues.

The bathroom door wasn't locked, so she wasn't taking another shower. She just wasn't here.

First, he contacted her phone. If it went through, then that might be enough to assuage his fears.

Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz.

The phone on the desk buzzed. She'd left it here.

He had a bad feeling about this—it was almost as though she had to leave while he was asleep.

He glanced at the clock. It was three thirty AM. Any work that started at this hour had to be unusual.

Were the talks really that confidential? But then it'd be even worse if I didn't go…

He worked and worked his brain, but he only came up with worst-case scenarios and no solutions.

"Ouka might know something." He needed information, so he dialed the number.

"What do you want? And at this hour, of all times? Things were finally getting good in my dream; the people were respecting me… This had better be worth it, or there'll be hell to pay. From you."

"Alfoncina is missing. Do you know anything?"

"What? Why would I? I don't know anything. Hey, did something happen to her?!" She wasn't even trying to play it cool.

"Then you guys are in the dark, too. Got it. I'll contact you again if I learn something!"

"What? Hold on a second—"

He couldn’t count on Ouka; she didn’t know what was going on. She was too far away.

“Has someone discovered some weakness of ours? But it’s weird that Ouka doesn’t know.”

Without any information, there was no point in trying to piece the situation together with his imagination.

“Sorry, Alfoncina!”

He looked at her phone-message history.

TO: Ouka ✧
TITLE: Yaaaaaay, Tokyo!
MESSAGE: I’m on a date with Ryouta!ヽ(´・∀・`)ノ

FROM: Ouka✧
TITLE: go away
MESSAGE: go to hell

“Geez, Ouka… Wait, that’s not why we’re here.”

Alfoncina didn’t have any exchanges with suspicious individuals, nor was there anything in her call history.

Ryouta ran out of the room, still dressed in his pajamas.

There were vending machines next to the elevators, but she wasn’t there, either. He couldn’t imagine any other reason she’d be on this floor.

He took the elevator to the first floor, but he didn’t see anyone who could be Alfoncina near the front desk.

“Um, did you see a girl about high school age leave earlier?”

“Oh, yes, I do think someone like that stepped outside…”

“Do you know where she went?”

“Unfortunately, no…”

With nothing else to go on, Ryouta headed outside—but quickly came to a stop.

He couldn’t keep wandering without any more clues. If someone had picked her up in a car, he was at a dead end.

“Why didn’t she tell me about work tomorrow…? I can’t believe she’s

neglecting her duty like this…”

He was only here because part of his job was to escort her.

It was entirely on him that he hadn’t been able to accomplish that.

But it was too late to feel sorry about it.

No—it was too *early* to feel sorry for himself. This wasn’t over until it was over.

He left the hotel property, turned right, and ran five hundred meters. All the shops were closed; there were no signs of any secret meetings. He might find her if he continued in that direction, but he decided to turn back.

If her meeting really were that secret, then he wouldn’t be able to find it running around on the streets.

He got a phone call from Ouka.

“Hey, I called the First Cathedral just in case, but no one knew anything. She used to live in Kanto, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she had friends in Tokyo.”

“Thanks, Ouka. I haven’t gotten any clues yet, so I’m still looking.”

“Did she leave her travel suitcase in the room?”

“Oh, yeah, it was…”

“Doesn’t that mean she’s probably going to come back, then?”

“Even if she wants to, maybe she can’t.” And while he was dillydallying over here, that possibility could be rising this very minute.

“I’m going to get her back!”

“All right. Do what you can do.”

He hung up and went back to searching.

If he just had a little more information, he could do something about this. Wasn’t there anything that could lead him to her?

That was when he heard something echoing in his head.

—Sigh, I want to go back to Ryouta soon.

He heard her thoughts—it was the minion power.

That’s right, I’m connected to her!

He slowly chased out his conscious mind, leaving more and more room for his minion instincts.

Then…his feet started moving.

This way!

He summoned his will to see Alfoncina, and his instincts fell into line with his sense of reason.

If I think about wanting to see her with both, then I should know where she is!

Alfoncina had saved him when he was on the brink of death on Mount Hatatate.

Now it was his turn to save her.

—I can't do this… Let me leave…

He could hear her feelings; they felt like cries for help. There was no mistaking it—he knew the way. He passed the hotel and ran along the street.

At the end of this road, his master—no, his dear friend—would be waiting for him.

"Please let me be in time!"

He wasn't sure what he could do without any weapons, but that was no reason to stand around doing nothing.

This wasn't about being her minion. He wanted to keep her safe, so he intended to do it. That was all.

—But I can't lose here. I'm not going to give it all up now.

She's fighting, too. She's going to keep going.

—I'll do what I must for you.

And I'll take care of you.

He had pushed himself so hard that his stomach was starting to hurt.

The sun wasn't out, but his body felt hot, like he'd been sunburned.

I'll rest as long as I need to after this is over, so please just hang in there!

He had been in plenty of life-and-death situations thus far, but this was nothing compared with before.

Then he heard footsteps headed his way.

"Ryouta!" Alfoncina was running toward him. She carried a large bag in her hands. She didn't look injured.

"Alfoncina! Are you okay?!"

"Ryouta! You came!"

Alfoncina immediately latched on to him in a hug. Her sweet scent tickled his nose; the sensation was affecting the rest of his body, too.

"This…is kind of embarrassing…"

"It's fine, no one's watching at this hour."

"I know that, but…"

They were the only two standing in the large, reclaimed lot.

“Were you worried about me?” she asked.

“Yeah, I—I was… I got a bad feeling, so…”

He had worried she wasn’t going to come back.

She tightened her arms around him. “I really wish I could date someone like you.”

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“Uh…Alfoncina, I—”

“You don’t have a girlfriend, right?” She questioned him in a teasing manner. He stood no chance against her like this.

“I don’t, no, but this is…”

“I’m kidding~.” She ruffled his hair. “Everyone would be mad at me~. I’ll wait just a little longer. Just a little more.”

She finally freed him. But the sensation still lingered.

“How much is a little longer…?”

“Who knows? Like I said yesterday, it could be about two months? If no one makes a move, then I’d consider the statute of limitations to be up. And I’ll be very bold when I act~.” She had already started walking toward the hotel. “Let’s go. I’m certain we should be able to sleep a bit more if we head back now.”

“Uh…so what were you doing at this hour…?” He could tell the danger had passed, but he still didn’t know what happened.

“I had some work I had to take care of. Well, more like beat into submission,” she said with glee. “But the real challenge is tomorrow. Oh, it’s today already.”

“Where was your work today…?”

“There’s a diner that’s open twenty-four hours a ways up the road, and that’s where I was. But that’s all settled now.”

She’d had a premeeting, or even confidential talks, with government officials at a diner in the middle of the night—he could instantly imagine it. Not many people would guess they were doing things at a diner of all places.

“Were your opponents powerful…?”

“Powerful? Well, we weren’t fighting with our fists or weapons. I fought with my own methods.”

So a negotiation. And whatever it was had been settled even before the main event.

“But the real fight is tomorrow.” Alfoncina’s smile briefly disappeared, but it was soon back. “I’m counting on you, Ryouta!”

“Of course, Alfoncina!”

“Work” was fierce—as soon as it began, the noise was almost deafening.

There was nothing peaceful about this at all; the venue was more like a battlefield.

"Listen, we are fighting against time," Alfoncina said from next to him. "You remember the layout, right? Make sure that on your first move, you use as little energy as possible. It's like boxing. You will eventually pay for it if you get too enthusiastic."

"Understood. I won't lose."

"I always want to run away right before we start. But now that we've come this far, we have no choice but to go through with it."

It wasn't long before someone came rushing toward them.

"Two? That will be one thousand yen! Thank you very much!"

The duo was at a doujinshi convention, at booth East A-05a.

Ryouta didn't really know much about any of this stuff, but they had been stationed right beside some shutters that were closed earlier that morning, and the assumption was that there was going to be quite the crowd of people.

There was already a huge line before the event started, and they were overwhelmed by customers once the venue opened. Their sheer passion left him in shock.

"Oh, please limit yourselves to three copies per person! Sorry, I cannot accept sketchbooks! A gift? Thank you very much! Ten thousand yen? Please hold on a moment—let me get some change!"

Their book-display and checkout-counter placement were perfect. They both could accomplish everything with the least amount of movement.

"Now listen to me. Just because we are a big doujin circle, it doesn't mean we can let people wait in line for a long time. The convention won't last forever. Think about how they'd feel if they spent the whole time on our circle. Hand out new copies fast enough that there cannot be a line!"

That was what Alfoncina had said to him before the event started, her eyes burning with the spirit of a true warrior.

"I'll do my best. I'll fly faster than an arrow. But can I just say one thing?

"Your work was for a convention?!?!?!?!?!"

They sold out before noon.

“Thank you~. We sold everything~! Here, have some water!”

He accepted the bottle she handed to him. “I had no idea conventions would be such hard work…,” he said.

The imposing walls of cardboard boxes now all sat empty.

“Aren’t they~? The manga world is a battle. You must be physically fit in this world~.”

Even though they were provided with chairs, the constant deluge of people meant they had no time to sit.

“But it’s fun, isn’t it? Having my own doujin circle means I get a taste of the excitement of selling my creations and then watching customers come to me to buy them. Once I learned how fun this was, I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop until I die.”

“That’s so cool,” he said. He really admired her moxie.

“There’s nothing cool about it. I’m not even acting. I like drawing manga, and that’s it. There’s nothing more to it. That’s why I don’t think I’m Kin Hayashimori the manga artist, but just a girl who likes manga.”[1]

“Were you selling books about the abbot this time?”

Cat-Eared Abbot: The Zen Mind was an anime that was getting popular. Shiren had good things to say about it, too.

“Mm-hmm. I’m happy so long as they get just the slightest taste of how much I love what I do~.”

“By the way, what *were* you doing at the diner last night…?”

“Oh gosh, I’ve gotten so much work for *YouRou IKou!* because of the anime~. I had to draw some extra comics as soon as possible, but I hadn’t been able to put aside any time for it. So I thought I’d wake up early instead~.”

“Oh yeah, I heard you cry, *I can’t do this, let me leave…*”

“I wanted to leave and get some more sleep. I’m so tired~.”

“Then what about *I’m not going to give it all up now*?”

“It means I wasn’t going to give up all my manga work.”

“Then *I’ll do what I must for you* was…”

“I was talking to my deadlines. I will do what I must for my deadlines—which I did, thankfully! I am very tired, though.”

Ryouta was starting to feel like he’d put in a lot of effort for nothing. “So…why did you leave your phone in the room yesterday?”

“Oh, I forgot about it!”

So that was all it was.

“And before we went to sleep, you said, ‘If I asked you to throw everything aside and run away with me, would you come with me?’ So was that…?”

“I just wanted to abandon my deadlines and the convention and get away from it all.”

And so the mystery was solved. What an anticlimax.

“I’m sorry, then what about the meeting between Japan and the Empire…?”

“I think someone else is going to that one~. This is a secret, but I heard they’re going to hold it in Oshiro. It would be quite troublesome to come out all this way if you consider security and whatnot.”

And now every mystery was solved.

“So your work was this convention and the manga stuff, right?” That was why she got no compensation from the state.

“Exactly. I applied to join this convention; then I got approval from the Empire. Japan is more than happy to let Kin Hayashimori in.”

“Kin Hayashimori sure has a lot of power!” The manga artist should have been her less powerful identity, but Hayashimori was no slouch, either. “Let’s clean up, then.”

“Okay. Oh~. On the way back, I have a quick meeting with some editors, okay~?”[2]

They began their trek back at night, so they got dinner boxes on the Shinkansen.

The boxes tended to run expensive, but in a way, it was comforting knowing the price cap wasn’t all that important.

“Wow, the chicken set was great!”

“It was only eight hundred yen, right? You could have gotten something nicer.”

“Nope, that’s plenty expensive by Fuyukura standards.”

“Na~na~nana~na~, nanananana~na~na~ Aaannd this is for you, Ryouta!” After humming a tune that sounded like she was at an awards ceremony, she handed him the *Jieyi* pills. “Just swallow them down. I’ve

heard they'll work almost immediately~."

Ryouta took the bottle from her and stared at them.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you taking them?"

"Because you seem kind of sad about this, Alfoncina," he replied, looking her in the eye.

She was smiling, but just on the surface. "I do? That's not my intention…"

"I know that. I guess it's a minion's instinct. You don't want me to take this, do you?"

"Haaah…" She sighed deeply. "I knew you would be able to tell."

"Please tell me all the effects this medicine has. You said there were no side effects before, so tell me all the main ones."

Resigned, Alfoncina began to talk. "This medicine doesn't undo a half-established minion transformation, but it instead blurs memories of the would-be master in the would-be minion. That's why they're called *Jieyi* pills—it's Chinese for 'memory dissolution.'"

"So if I take them…"

"You won't forget about me completely, but you'll find your memory will be fuzzy about things like when I've bitten you or how we came to Tokyo," Alfoncina said. She was acting nonchalant about it, but that was because she knew it would be unfair to express her reluctance.

His minion bond with her was just a little too strong to not be a problem, and for Ryouta's sake, it would be best if he used the medicine.

Many others would be satisfied with this conclusion and would even be happy about it. All she had to do was swallow some of her own selfishness.

"That's why you said we should make our trip in Tokyo a date."

"I thought it would be a nice idea, since I knew this wouldn't last…but maybe I shouldn't have… I didn't realize I'd end up so interested in you…"

Ryouta was also able to tell that the way she was behaving the previous day showed her true self.

"Come on now, you should take it right after you eat. It's not going to put your life in danger~."

"No, I don't think I will." He placed the bottle on the little table where his empty meal box sat.

"Are you sure?"

"I feel like I'm chickening out with a reset button. I think I'll just have

to live accepting you've bitten me before."

"I'm not responsible if Shiren and Ouka get mad at you~."

"I'll just explain myself. It's okay……I think."

If they were going to get mad, then they were going to get mad. But he could probably reason with them.

"If I told them to put themselves in my shoes for a second, they'd probably accept."

They would both understand the pain of being forgotten. There was no terrible tragedy to erase, so it was likely best to keep his memories.

"All right. Then I'll keep this with me, okay? I'm not sure if I can bring this into the Empire."

"Okay."

Alfoncina placed the bottle into her bag. "But I'm not responsible if you make any mistakes because you're a minion~." She smiled with glee.

"Yeah, you're right… I'll manage."

The two looked at each other and smiled.

"This medicine cost almost thirty thousand yen~. And it was all for nothing~."

"I'm sorry…I'll pay you back…"

"But it's a small price to pay considering I still get to keep you around from here on out~."

"Huh?"

"You did very well these past two days."

He felt something warm brush his cheek.

"Wha…? Wait, Alfoncina, did you…kiss me…?" he asked, flustered by the sudden gesture.

"Heh-heh~. I think you're imagining things~. Or perhaps, it's best if you never find out?"

"You're right…I won't ask any more questions…"

And just like the previous day, she yawned. She'd hardly slept the night before, too.

"*Yaaawn*, I'm going to take a little nap again. Don't wake me up, okay~?"

"All right."

"Oh, and no matter what happens, do not wake me up."

"Even if we come to Oshiro?"

“That’s right. Our only choice is to pass it.”

“Well, you should probably wake up…”

“But if you wake me up just because we’ve reached our stop, I will be in an extremely bad mood. That’s how bad it gets when my sleep is interrupted.”

“That’s awful…”

If she wasn’t awake, then their only choice was to miss their stop.

“Anyway, I’m going to sleep! Don’t wake me up!”

In a single minute, Alfoncina started snoring softly. And one minute after that…

…she fell over onto Ryouta’s lap again.

“Zzz, zzz…”

“Rgh…I have a bad feeling about this…”

“Oh, Ryouta, so big and hard… I’ve never seen a beer bottle so tall and sturdy…”

“I genuinely can’t tell if she’s sleep-talking or just messing with me…”

Alfoncina still didn’t wake up when they came to Oshiro Station.

“*Yaaawn*, good morning, Ryouta. Are we almost there?”

“We passed Oshiro a long time ago,” Ryouta said, exhausted. “We’re almost in Hakata, the last stop. We came all the way to Kyushu.”

“Oh my, we won’t be able to turn back at this hour~.”

They had apparently boarded the last train from Tokyo to Hakata, so they had no hope of getting back to Oshiro.

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“Ah, well~.” Alfoncina grinned. “We’ll just have to stay another night in Hakata.”

“Yeah…we don’t really have any other options…”

He had a sneaking suspicion that Shiren and Ouka would probably be angry with them.

They disembarked at Hakata Station and began to wander around the downtown area.

“Let’s find a room with a double bed, then.”

“Okay…just try and keep it cheap, please…”

“Oh, would you want to stay in a place like that, then…?”

She pointed to a hotel painted neon pink in the distance. The prices advertised were most certainly cheap, but…

“No, no! I’d much rather stay in a business hotel, not in a love hotel!”

“Oh, I see what you mean. How shocking~.”

And once again, they stayed in a hotel with a rather expensive restaurant on-site.

I’ve seen enough money to bankrupt the Fuyukura finances these past few days…

Life-Advice Corner with Archbishop Alfoncina XIII of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood #2

Q: My parents run a convenience store, but we hardly have any business. I am left with no reason to live. What should I do...? Is there anything I can do...? (From Tam Akishee Joe, 3-5 Chimatsuri-cho)

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EPILOGUE

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EPILOGUE

"I'm finally home…"

They returned to Oshiro from Hakata on the Shinkansen, hopped on a taxi, and finally came to the border.

When they passed through the immigration office, they would be back in the Sacred Blood Empire.

"Really well done this weekend~. I hope you get a lot of rest~."

"Yeah… Traveling sure uses a lot of energy…"

"But we had the time to go back and visit your family when we went back to Oshiro. Are you sure you didn't want to say hi?" Alfoncina tilted her head in slight worry.

"No, it's all right. It's not like I'm never going to see them again. And my home right now is in the Sacred Blood Empire."

There were lots of people waiting for his return here.

"I see. Then I'm glad we have you here as a friend, Ryouta!"

"Yes, same here."

Then as they exited the office, they found an entourage waiting for them.

Shiren, Ouka, Sasara, Tamaki, Kokoko, Kiyomizu, and Rei—almost everyone was there.

"Oh, hey, thank you all for coming out and—uh."

He noticed a potent, threatening air around them. Especially from Shiren and Ouka.

Their eyes were glazed over; he wondered what happened to them.

"Ah, Ryouta. So you do have the courage to step into this land again. I am impressed."

"What's wrong, Shiren? Did I do something wrong? I brought you souvenirs, though."

"Sure, I'll take the souvenirs. But this is a different matter entirely."

"Wait, you'll still take them?"

Shiren shoved her phone into Ryouta's face. "Look at the text Alfoncina

sent me! Explain yourself!”

There was a text that said, We ended up in Hakata. We’re staying here tonight! ¯\(ˋ•∀•´)/, accompanied by a picture of the double bed in the room.

“And then she sent me this.”

She then showed him a text that said, By the way, this is where we stayed on night one, with a picture of the double bed from the room they first stayed in.

“Oh~. I’m sorry! I was so excited, I just had to send the pictures to everyone~. Tee-hee, whoopsie!”

“You don’t genuinely think this is a ‘whoopsie,’ do you?! You’re smiling! You’re totally smiling!!” Ryouta exclaimed.

She had a massive grin on her face. There was no doubt that she was hoping for this very situation.

“Alfoncina, you falling asleep and missing your stop was all a part of your plan, wasn’t it? Were you asleep at all…?” It was Ouka who pressed Alfoncina for answers this time, although her eyes were glazed over. The familial resemblance between her and Shiren just then was quite strong.

“On all the gods of heaven and earth, it’s the truth. I missed the stop because I was asleep!” Alfoncina declared with confidence.

“It’s true! We did!” Ryouta added to give her backup. Best to nip any unnecessary doubts in the bud.

“We had gone through so much the night before together—I barely slept. Of course, I’d miss the stop because I was asleep!”

“Yeah, exactly! So much had happened the night— Hey! Phrasing, come on!”

“Ryouta, don’t tell me that the way you held me last night was all for nothing…? Oh, I’m so sad…”

“W-well, I did hug you, but…I don’t think that’s the right meaning here!”

That had happened because they had safely reunited; there were no romantic implications whatsoever.

The menacing stares grew even stronger.

“Shiren, get Ryouta. I’ll get Matsuko Kimura.”

“Got it. Whoever wins first will provide support for the other.”

“What an inauspicious division of roles! This is nothing!”

A sword came down onto Ryouta, and a few clippings of his hair scattered into the wind.

"*Tsk.* I missed."

It was Sasara.

"You didn't miss! A little bit to the side, and you would've killed me!"

"Silence! How dare you hop straight onto someone else's train! I'm going to rip you to shreds like string cheese! Why were you holding her? Why were you sleeping together?! You have no sense of shame!" Sasara's face was bright red, as though her anger and embarrassment were occupying the same space.

But despite her embarrassment, he would still die if her sword made contact.

"What do you mean, 'hop onto someone else's train'—? Gah! Her sword got faster!"

"Silence! Be quiet! I cannot trust you anymore! You traitor! I will find true happiness with someone who is not you!"

"What does that have to do with—?"

"I told you to shut up!"

"Agh! I'm going to die! I'm seriously going to die—stop it!"

"Lady Ouka! Let us lead a happy life together, Lady Ouka!"

"Hmm, I think it's time to request an Empire branch of The Cat's Hollow." Ouka, as she usually did, completely ignored her.

On the other hand, Kiyomizu was relatively unfazed by it all. "Ryouta dearest, I don't care how dirty you get."

"I'm not dirty!"

"And if there's ever any girl you'd like to cut ties with, just let me know. Because I'll cut them. Both the ties and the girl."

"No, just the ties, right?! Why are you acting so eager to murder people?!"

Rei had already fainted from the shock.

"Rei hasn't even said a word! She's passed out! Is she okay?!" Ryouta exclaimed.

"It seems like she has no consciousness, no pulse, and no sounds from her heart, but I'm certain she'll be fine," Kiyomizu explained.

"She's practically dead!"

"But the same thing happened two days ago, and she came back to life."

“You’re using up all your miracles, Rei!”

“I’d rather you die by my hand, Ryouta Fuyukura!”

“Sasara, please cut it out! You are actually going to kill me!”

Tamaki and Kokoko watched on from a distance.

“See, Kokoko, I could never get married to him…,” said Tamaki. “He and the archbishop are well suited to each other. No one wants to marry someone who owns a failing convenience store, ha-ha-ha… I wish I could disappear…”

“It’s okay. Look how loose he is. Give him a little push, and that’s that. Even you could do it. The man really has no integrity. I misjudged him.”

“You two are getting the wrong idea!” Ryouta interjected. “Nothing happened!”

“Oh, I think I’m starting to hear a call from the dense sea of trees. It’s telling me to come quickly… May I? Can I go, even with nothing to my name? I can’t ever keep anything for myself—but maybe that’s all right. I’ll go next time, then. I’ll buy a one-way ticket, then. It’s cheaper that way.”

“Stop communicating with dangerous entities, Shijou!”

“Big Sis Tamaki, you should take the guy along with you.”

“Don’t give her any weird ideas, Kokoko!”

The energy was the same as it had always been.

Yeah, this is how the Empire should be. I just don’t want to get hit by a sword…

At some point, Ryouta had grown accustomed to the absurd.

And then there was Alfoncina. “Ryouta…when we get married, we should do it at the First Cathedral…”

“You really don’t have to blush *and* say weird things at the same time!”

“We could save a lot of money at the First Cathedral.”

“Cheapskate!”

“I think we should give out cathedral charms as wedding favors.”

“Not the best time to be emptying out excess stock!”

It took almost an hour to resolve the misunderstandings.

That night, Ryouta had safely returned to the Fuyukura household, but—

“Ah, the collar life starts again…”

—the collar was closed tight around his neck, claiming him as Shiren’s

(prospective) minion.

"We don't have much choice. Especially with the untrustworthy Alfoncina around… It'd be too late if I put it on after the fact."

Shiren grabbed his arm. "I was so worried… You have no idea…"

"I'm sorry…and we had to stay away an extra night, too…"

"Kiyomizu didn't come around because you were gone, so I really was alone at night. It was something I was used to a long time ago, but it really takes a lot of strength to get through it now…"

She didn't look so much angry as sad.

"I don't plan on traveling for a while, so don't worry."

"Y-yeah…try not to leave your master alone so much… You're abandoning your duty as minion…"

"I know. But my home, to me, is here. So I'll always be back."

This run-down house was now like an old, comfortable pair of slippers. Well, he would prefer a place that was a bit more spacious and modern, but he wasn't counting on Ouka's mercy…

"E-exactly…you need to clean and do the laundry and cooking for me…"

She had turned a little red when he said "my home." "Oh, then wouldn't that make me, like…your wife…? Ah-ha-ha-ha…"

"I think I'm more like the wife, doing all that. You're the master."

"Oh. You're right. I'm the master…head of the household…" She seemed a bit conflicted by all this.

"So why don't we have some of the snacks I got for you?"

"Yes! We're gonna eat a bunch today to celebrate your coming home!" Shiren immediately got excited. "Ooh! Treats from Tokyo! These are *mentai* chips from Hakata, huh? And there's a lot of snacks in here. Where are these from?"

"Oh, those are extras from the gifts that Alfoncina got."

Big-name doujinshi circles sure got a lot of snacks as gifts.

Alfoncina wouldn't have been able to finish them on her own, so Ryouta brought some home with him. He'd doubted Shiren would mind.

"Then I guess I'll start with this." Shiren dug in to one of the presents. "Oh, there's a letter in here. Is it from a fan?"

"That doesn't belong to us. We should give it back to—"

"No, wait—it's for me."

No way. Why would a letter addressed to Shiren be in there?

But sure enough, at the top of the letter, it read, *Please deliver this to Shiren Fuyukura if possible*.

Shiren opened it.

Before she even looked at the letter itself, her eyes went straight to the sender's name.

"…Sairi Fuyukura," she murmured quietly and stoically. "That's my mother's name."

※"You Call That a Haunted House?" is an amended and edited

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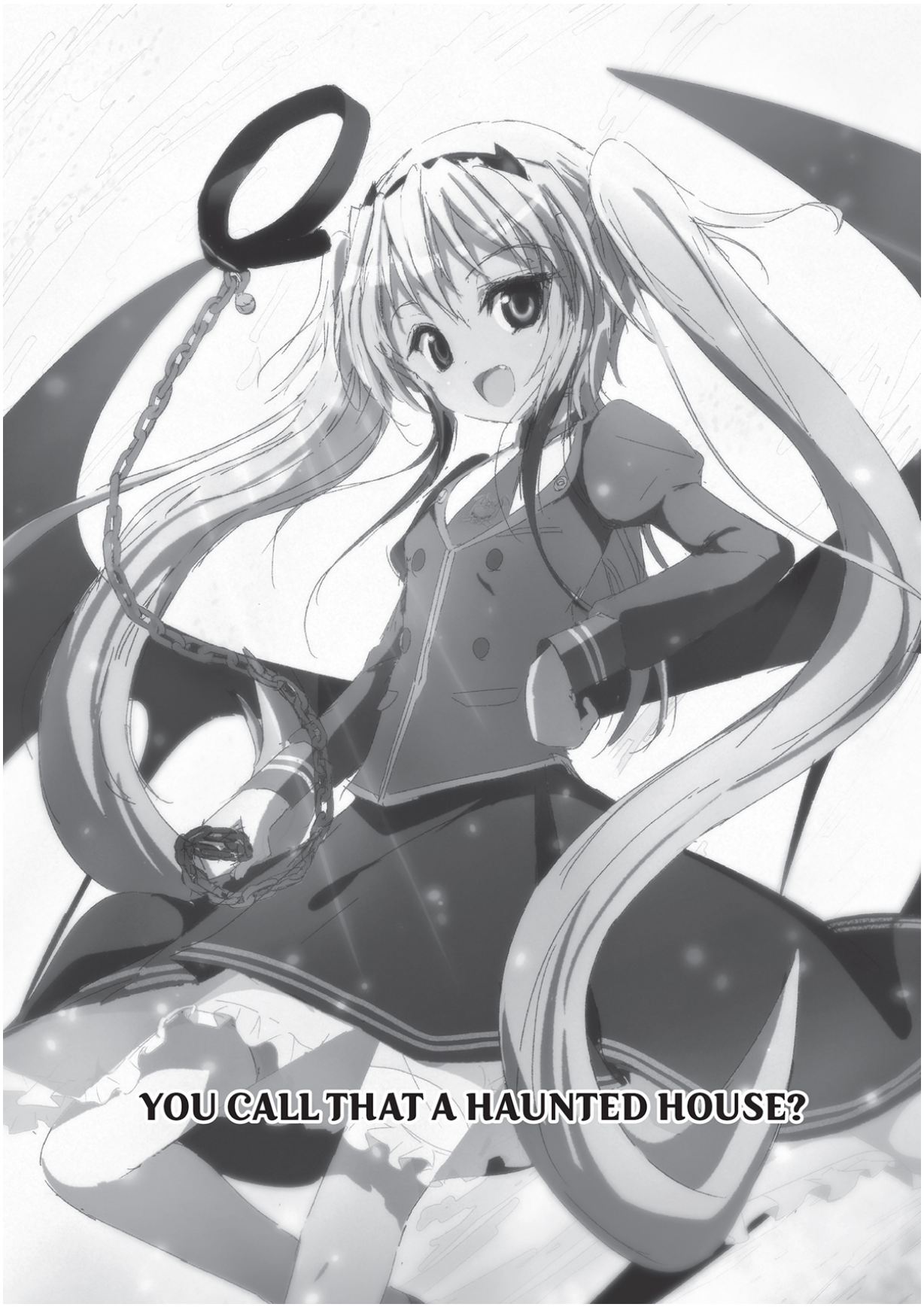
YOU CALL THAT A HAUNTED HOUSE?

©Hiroki Ozaki

“*A haunted house*… I’ve heard those words like twenty times already. Are they building something?”

In the break after third period, Ryouta came to Shiren Fuyukura to ask a question.

“Ah, that’s the haunted house that’ll be open soon.” Her pigtails swished around as she turned to look at him. “The newspaper today said that they’ll be opening next Saturday.”

“Oh, so the Empire has one of those now. But why just a haunted house?”

“They were apparently going to make a copy of D*sn*yl*nd at first, but Big Sis said it failed because of all the pressure.”

“That sure was close! The whole country would’ve been done for!”

This was the Sacred Blood Empire, a country that was basically just Japan, but slightly to the left. This country had occupied a rural city that was once a part of Japan called Akinomiya and declared independence.

It was inhabited by a race of people called the Sacred Blooded—vampires who strongly resembled Japanese people.

When a Sacred Blooded bit into a human, they could force the human to follow simple commands, such as *buy me a jam roll*. These servile humans were called minions.

Ryouta, who had a bad habit of not keeping up with current events, had wandered into this country, gotten stuck there, become the servant to a girl named Shiren Fuyukura, and started actively serving her. Well, “actively” was debatable, but he was serving her in some capacity.

His original family name was *Asagiri*, but he was currently going by *Fuyukura*. Minions typically took on the name of their masters.

“Honestly, I really hated it! We don’t have any diplomatic relations, yet they sabotaged us at every step of the way! I suppose that just means D*sn*yl*nd is dangerous territory… Anyone who tries to copy them without proper precautions will die…”

“Or maybe don’t copy them to begin with.”

The source of this worrying spiel was this country’s emperor (and Ryouta’s classmate), Ouka Sarano.

Back when they were in elementary school, before there had been even a whisper of the Empire, she had been Ryouta’s classmate. One could say they were childhood friends. She was also Shiren’s older sister, even though

they had different last names.

According to Shiren herself, the kanji for *Sarano* took too long to write, so she was fine sticking with Fuyukura.

"*Sigh*, and we could have made a boatload of foreign currency off a theme park… What am I supposed to do with a haunted house…? How are we supposed to make money from that…?"'

"I get that you need a national budget, but you sound money crazy when you put it like that!"

"Money crazy? Oh, please, no compliments today."

"If you think that's a compliment, then you like money way more than I thought," Ryouta complained.

Shiren pulled at Ryouta's sleeve, a gesture that meant she was trying to be thoughtful. When she wasn't being thoughtful, she'd pull on the chain attached to his collar. The collar wasn't a fetish thing—just an indicator that he was Shiren's (prospective) minion.

"Hey, Ryouta…um, do you want to go to the haunted house together on Saturday?"

"Oh, okay. Are you sure you don't want to see the tomato-eating contest?"

The Sacred Blooded liked red foods, so tomatoes were especially popular.

"We can cancel that one… Let's go to the haunted house."

"Okay, works for me."

"It's settled, then! Time to get spooked on Saturday! What kind of things will jump out at us? Will they be regular ghosts? Or zombies? Or serial killers?"

"You don't sound all that scared talking about this haunted house."

In fact, Shiren was rather excited.

Ouka watched on in frustration, growling under her breath.

"What is it, Lady Ouka? Are foreign countries asking too much of you? Oh, seeing you so vexed is another wonderful sight. I feel a nosebleed coming on."

It was Sasara Tatsunami, one of the Imperial Guard, who came up beside Ouka. She had been infatuated with the emperor for some time.

When she was on duty as an Imperial guard, she wore armor much like that of a European knight, but she wore her school uniform in class, albeit

with a sword at her hip.

"Oh, no. This is about the haunted house."

"Ah, the haunted house that we were told would most certainly put us in the red."

"Exactly. It feels like my political blunder is being taken advantage of, and now it feels awful…" Ouka sat in thought for a moment.

Eighty-nine percent of the time, this meant a vicious scheme was incoming.

"I got it."

Three minutes later, a villainous smile crossed Ouka's face.

"Watch. This haunted house will be one to remember."

And so Saturday came—the day Shiren and Ryouta were meant to go to the haunted house.

There was a small crowd of people waiting, and Ouka was one of them.

"Everyone's here."

There was Tamaki Shijou, Sasara Tatsunami, Kiyomizu Jouryuuji, Alfoncina XIII, and Rei Asagiri (and Ouka).

"As I've told you before, the Fuyukura household will be coming to this haunted house very soon. And if possible, we should interfere with them… and show them a real scary time. Then we'll make sure they're never alone together… We'll give them the best memories those two could ask for."

Ouka's honest feelings and the front she put up were mixing together into a very strange plan.

"Brilliant, Lady Ouka. We will make sure to provide them wonderful memories of their time alone together with us." (Sasara)

"I can't imagine if something happened to my precious little brother in the dark, so I'll watch…over him!" (Rei)

"If you have any orders for my lowly self, then I will follow them… I have no intentions of interfering with them, but if you command it…" (Tamaki)

"Can the ghosts cuddle up to the guests? Hee-hee, I'm so excited~." (Alfoncina)

"I'm so jealous of you, Shiren! I will do everything in my power to get in their way and make sure the mood never gets just right! I will not allow

them to get any closer in this haunted house!" (Kiyomizu)

"Kiyomizu, read the room, please."

Kiyomizu was the only one who was speaking honestly.

"I'm completely ready (to take advantage of the chaos and steal Ryouta dearest into the darkness), so there's no need for concern."

"I'm a bit worried, but I'm counting on you all," said Ouka. "These are orders from your emperor, okay?"

Meanwhile, Shiren and Ryouta arrived at the haunted house. Given the undeveloped area it was in, the house also looked totally abandoned.

"It's already scary in a way. This just screams bankruptcy to me…"

It was so desolate that Ryouta could feel his excitement slipping away.

"Mm-hmm, this is good. There's no one around, which means we can take our time. Isn't that the best?!"

Shiren, on the other hand, was raring to go. She marched forward, tugging his chain as she went.

"Ow, ow! That's my collar! Can't you slow down when you're holding the chain?"

Ryouta was her minion (candidate), so he had to wear the collar.

Furthermore, regular minions obeyed their masters, so they didn't need a collar. Ryouta's status wasn't official, so the collar was insurance against other Sacred Blooded who might target him to make him their minion. It was tedious, but it wasn't a fetish.

"Then we have no choice but to hold hands, I suppose." Shiren grasped Ryouta's hand. Her face seemed a bit flushed.

"Is a haunted house really something to be that scared of?"

"Huh…? What are you talking about?"

"Well, your face is kind of red."

"…Oh, uhhh, yes! I hate ghosts and haunted houses! They scare me more than three square meals a day!"

"That doesn't tell me anything!"

There was something suspicious about Shiren's behavior, but, well, people just got weird sometimes, so he decided to think of it as one of those occasions.

This was Ryouta's first time at a haunted house, too.

He imagined people dressed as ghosts would come jumping out at them from behind corners, people dressed as corpses would suddenly start

moving, and whatnot.

There was a window next to the entrance that read TICKETS.

"I wonder how much it costs for a high schooler. Five hundred yen?"

"Not five hundred yen. Five hundred sacred yen."

"The rate is basically one-to-one anyway, so it doesn't matter…"

The currency here was called "sacred yen," not to be confused with the Japanese yen.

ENTRY	
Elementary School & Younger	¥300 sacred yen
Middle School & High School	¥500 sacred yen
Adults	¥700 sacred yen
Uglies	FREE
People with Active Social Lives and Significant Others	¥1,500 sacred yen

"You can't set prices by someone's success in life! That's way too subjective!" Ryouta complained. Usually, his complaints were much briefer.

A lot of decisions felt random and haphazard in this country, and this was one example of that.

"……Two high school students, so one thousand sacred yen."

"Nope! You are significant others, so that'll be three thousand sacred yen!" the ticket vendor interjected. Rudely.

It was Ouka.

"Why are you here?!"

"It's opening day, so I did the ribbon cutting! And the girl who usually sells the tickets suddenly canceled on me, so I just took over."

"We sure see the emperor doing a lot of mundane jobs. Make one of your underlings do it or whatever."

"Big Sis, you're not scheming something this time, are you…?" Shiren stepped closer to Ryouta out of wariness.

"I love my subjects."

Ouka's smile suddenly turned eerily saintly.

"Wow, she put on that smile real quick. She's definitely lying…"

"I love my subjects who pay their taxes."

“That’s so specific!”

“Go! Get scared! Piss yourselves!”

“No!”

“Be ready. I’ve got a plan that will scare the socks off the both of you.” Ouka grinned smugly. What was she plotting?

“Okay, we’re going in.”

When they stepped inside, it was unsurprisingly dark. The set showed them that they were in a run-down graveyard.

“Ooh…it looks much better than I thought it would…” Shiren clung to Ryouta in genuine fear.

“It’ll be fine. We’ll just have a zombie or two jumping out at us.”

Then Ryouta’s phone rang. “It’ll ruin the mood, but I guess I have to take it.”

He checked the name, but the number was private.

“Haaah, haaah, you’re in the haunted house right now.”

“Uh, what is this…?”

The line cut.

“Who was that?”

“I’m not really sure… I think they used something to change their voice.” The sound had been creepy and definitely artificial.

“This is a haunted house, so maybe that’s just part of the act here?”

“No, I can’t imagine they’d have my phone number…”

His phone rang again.

“Haaah, haaah, you’re near me now…”

The line cut again.

“Hey, come on, why are we going with *the call is coming from inside the house* nonsense…?”

His phone rang yet again right afterward.

He didn’t know what to do. The caller was probably getting really close to them now. But he had to pick up. Letting it ring was much scarier.

“Haaah, haaah, I ate the pudding you didn’t finish…”

“Stop! Who the heck are you?! You ate my pudding from yesterday!”

He’d made sure to leave half for today, but it had vanished from the fridge.

“I-it’s not me…and I wouldn’t call you here anyway!”

“Then who is it? The clown upstairs?”

And his phone rang again.

"I think I prefer something more flan-like for next time."

"I don't buy my food for you!"

Ryouta wished the caller would make up their mind on whether they wanted to scare him or start a stand-up routine with him.

Once again, his phone rang, and he picked it right up.

"Haaah, haaah, look behind you…"

He felt his blood run cold. "Th-this is a bad joke, right…?"

Slowly, he turned around. Standing there was Kiyomizu.

"So it was you! And you ate my pudding!"

"Her Majesty told me that if I contacted you like normal but with a voice changer, it'd be much scarier."

"Right. So Ouka started this."

It all made sense now.

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji was a Japanese girl who liked Ryouta so much, she came to the Empire on her own. Most would mistake her for an elementary schooler, but she was indeed a high school student.

"I like flan."

"Buy it yourself."

"No, there's no point if you haven't started eating it first—"

"Just go home. Seriously. Leave."

"Well, my job here is done anyway, so I am going home. To your house, Ryouta dearest."

"Anywhere but there!"

Kiyomizu left, stomping over the gravestone set along the way.

"I thought her family ran a temple. She's damning herself," Shiren said, astonished.

"Yeah, well, it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"I have a terrible feeling about this, Ryouta…about what my sister's been planning…" She already looked tired.

"Yeah, I feel it, too… Wait, do you hear something?"

He suddenly heard a voice coming from beyond the graves.

"We're in the red… The store is in the red again this month…and almost every other day, someone shoplifts… We try to hire part-time workers, but the pay is so cheap, no one wants to work. Now that I think about it, we've been getting a lot of calls from collectors lately. But my fifth father pretends

not to be home and never answers. When I say he's out, the caller suddenly gets angry and yells at me not to lie. They say that they know my father is there, and that I'm making myself complicit. But my father tells me not to deal with them, and he doesn't listen to me. I don't know what else to do, so I just apologize over and over. But it's never enough. They said they'll come to the store directly next time, and then they hung up. I'm certain my father will be angry if I tell him this. But I know I can't ignore it… I have no idea what I should do… No matter how I struggle, nothing ever goes well… Oh, look, I found a rope."

""Don't do it!""

Ryouta and Shiren rushed into an employee hallway in the corner of the graveyard, where they found Tamaki sitting on a metal folding chair.

Tamaki Shijou was one of Ryouta's classmates, and she was a girl with an overwhelmingly pessimistic personality.

Her family ran a failing convenience store.

"Oh, it's you two… Her Majesty told me to say out loud the things I've been thinking about lately, and just to be myself."

"Well, it sure is scary!"

"Yes. I have such long hair, I thought I might do a good job as a ghost."

Tamaki's hair was indeed pitch-black and pin straight, so she would indeed make for a great ghost. But—

"No, I don't think you would."

"Huh? Why do you say that, Ryouta?"

"You're too cute, Shijou. You're not really fit for scary roles."

"Oh, Ryouta…I…"

It was dim in the haunted house, but Tamaki could feel her cheeks grow red.

Then there came a tug on his collar.

"*Bft!* You're choking me, you're choking me! Stop it, Shiren!"

"I wonder what kind of ghosts we'll run into next. Come on, let's get going. I'm so scared without you around, Ryouta. Ah, oh no, I'm scared." Shiren marched forward, pulling on the chain as she went. She seemed upset.

Past the graveyard was a set made to resemble a school classroom.

The desks were in neat rows, and there was a blackboard in front of all of them.

“I bet a ghost is going to jump out of the broom closet here.”

“That’s likely. The broom closet’s in the back.”

They found the closet tipped over…with a woman lying underneath it.

“This isn’t scary; this is tragic!” Ryouta exclaimed.

“I feel like I’m going to laugh, but I’m not sure if I should!” said Shiren. “Is she okay?!”

The lady underneath the closet started to wave her hands around in an attempt to get up.

“Ryou! I was waiting for you in front of the closet when it suddenly fell on top of me! Help! *Ehem, ehem!*”

“Oh, Rei’s a part of this, too…”

Rei Asagiri was Ryouta’s older sister.

She’d followed him to the Empire and now made a living as an Imperial ninja. She was sickly and had terrible luck.

“That’s not very scary, Rei, so you can stop now,” Shiren said.

“No, the closet fell on me, and it’s…very heavy! Help me. *Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*.”

Her cry for help was drowned out by her coughs.

“Can you not move, Rei?”

“*Ehem, ehem.* (Translation: No, I can’t; please help…)”

“Sorry, I can’t understand you.”

“*Ehem, ehem.* (Translation: Please just help me, Ryou!)”

“Uh, are you okay?”

“*Ehem, ehem.* (Translation: No, listen to me! We’re supposed to be brother and sister; why can’t we communicate?!)”

“Are you really, really okay?”

“*Ehem, ehem.* (Translation: I’m really, really not okay!)”

“Okay, then if you’re fine, say, *ehem, ehem*, and if you’re in trouble, say, *eh-HEM, eh-HEM*.”

“*Ehem, ehem…* (Translation: I’m too tired to cough that forcefully…)”

“She sounds okay, so let’s move on.”

They left Rei behind. But that was how her luck usually went.

“What if we keep running into all the usual suspects…? Five hundred sacred yen is still a rip-off!”

After their third interruption, Shiren was getting irritated. “This is the

same as being at school… We aren't getting any alone time…"

"Hmm? What was that?"

"O-oh, nothing!" Shiren quickly waved the question away.

Either way, her bad feeling was right on the mark.

"Hiya~. Are you having fun~?"

They came across a shrine set and found Alfoncina standing there.

Afoncina XIII was the archbishop of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, the Empire's national religion, which meant she was the most important person in the organization. But she was also actively attending their high school at the year above Shiren and Ryouta.

"Oh, I thought you might be here, Matsuko Kimura."

"Don't call me by my real name, Shiren! My real name is not an option!"

Alfoncina's real name didn't sound nearly as fancy, so she hated hearing it.

"So what? Why are you all here in the haunted house? Having you people around isn't going to scare me at all."

"Sure, it can be scary. Let me tell you a spooky story. Come listen." Alfoncina leaned over to whisper into Shiren's ear.

Ryouta saw Shiren's expression change drastically.

"Wh-wh-wh-what an indecent story! That would never happen!"

"Aw~. It wouldn't? I thought that was exactly what you were hoping for here~. I mean, it's so dark inside the haunted house."

Shiren's face was already bright red.

"Aw~. You came all the way out here, so I thought that's what you wanted, at the least~."

"Huh? What are you two talking about?" Ryouta took a step forward.

"Well, you see—"

"Stay back!" Shiren jammed her fingers into his eyes.

"Gaaaaaaaaaah! Cut it out with the eye jabs! Owwww…"

Ryouta writhed in pain. The haunted house wasn't particularly terrifying, but he was finding his own kind of fear here.

"Well, I was just guessing why Shiren came here to the haunted house __"

"Stop, Alfoncina! Ryouta will die if you say any more!"

"Hold on, hold on! Why would I die from something like that?! Stop

acting like you're the one who needs to save me!"

"Then I'll tell you a scary story this time, Ryouta~. Come listen." When Ryouta stood up, Alfoncina approached him. "Storytime~."

"I'm listening."

"……Hooo~." She blew into his ear.

"What are you doing?! Please don't do that!"

Alfoncina was beautiful enough to also be actively working as a model, and he knew he would be in danger if she did things like that to him. And Shiren was already in an inexplicably bad mood.

"Then I'm going to tell you a serious story, okay?" And she jumped right into erotica.

I thought this might happen, but I was right…

"And so then ××××× gets ○○○○○…"

I can't believe I'm paying attention to this, but this isn't scary at all…

"So △, entwined with ××, touches ●● a couple of times, which makes ◎◎◎ all hard—"

This is just a dirty story…but I want to know what happens next…

"————————————Anyone who hears this story dies in three days."

"What the hell?! Why did it get scary all of a sudden?!"

"*Sigh*, well, you listened to the end, so that's what happens…"

"That's not fair!"

"Oh, if you purchase a pendant from the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, it'll save you from the curse, or maybe it won't."

"This is a ghost-story scam!"

"It costs nine thousand eight hundred yen."

"I'm not buying it!"

"It comes in seven colors: red, blue, green, yellow, white, black, and skeleton."

"Why are there so many?!"

"All right, see you later~." And so Alfoncina sauntered away, carefree as ever.

"I guess the next ones to show up will probably be Sasara and Ouka, then."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

The both of them were getting tired now.

“I think we’ve wasted our money. This is just gonna be a big mess…”

The next set piece they came to was an old-fashioned Japanese house. And it was a whole house, built perfectly according to the style.

A short table sat on top of the tatami, and an ancient clock hung on one of the pillars. There were even more rooms they could see from where they were standing.

“This really is a haunted house. I don’t see any ghosts coming at us, though.”

“Just show yourselves already; otherwise, we’re going to the tomato-eating com— What?!”

Shiren’s face tensed.

A puddle of liquid slowly oozed toward them.

It wasn’t water—it was too sticky for that.

“This smells like blood. The Sacred Blooded know that smell anywhere.”

“You sure you’re not smelling dried blood from somewhere else…?”

It was hard to imagine that a genuine accident had happened in such a lighthearted place.

“Why would I ever mistake the smell of blood? And there’s so much of it.”

They then heard a scream in the distance.

“Lady Ouka, Lady Oukaaa!”

They knew that voice—it was Sasara, Ouka’s guard.

“Did something happen to—?”

“Big Sis!”

There was clearly something wrong going on. Nothing suggested that this was part of the show.

“Ryouta, I need to fight—give me your blood.” Shiren signaled to him with her eyes.

That was all he needed to understand. He lowered his head.

“Just don’t take too much.”

“Serve me for my sister, okay?” Shiren carefully sank her teeth into the base of Ryouta’s neck and slowly sucked out some blood.

The Sacred Blooded could improve their physical strength by drinking the blood of a loved one—at least, the average ones could.

Those from the Imperial bloodline transformed in an incredible way—

and that overwhelming power was the very reason their family had such high status.

Something sprouted from Shiren's back.

They were wings—symbols of power and freedom, and a sign of her station.

"I'm ready."

In the dark, Shiren's eyes glowed a faint red.

"But I still can't control my powers one hundred percent, so I might end up destroying the set."

The emperor's little sister set off.

"Get out of my way!" She smacked away the shoji screens and wardrobes, then knocked down the pillars. The living-room set became a pile of rubble in the blink of an eye.

She had to reach the truth, even if that meant destroying everything that had been rented for the set.

The stream of blood was still flowing. She had to reach its source.

Beyond the wall was an employee corridor.

The blood was coming from in there. Yes, this was the right place.

"Stay there, Big Sis!" She punched down the door and rushed inside. "Big Sis, are you okay?!"

"Oh, Shiren. Why are you here?"

There was Ouka, sitting in a metal folding chair as though nothing had happened.

"Oh, you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why are you transformed, though?"

"What about the blood, then…?"

"Oh, the blood? There." Ouka pointed to the floor.

There was Sasara, collapsed and bleeding more than any person should be able to survive.

"Lady Ouka, Lady Ouka…," she murmured in delirium.

"Whoa, hold on, you can't do this! You can't just be sitting there like nothing happened!" Shiren said. Her wings vanished, now that she knew there was no enemy present.

“Well, this is what happened a few minutes ago.”

★ ★

“What do you think? Do you think I can pull this kimono off?”

“Yes, you are unbelievably beautiful. *Huff, huff...*”

Ouka was wearing a kimono, and Sasara was worked up about it—the usual sight.

“Listen. Give me the signal when they come. I’ll yell *boo!* at them from behind.”

It was an extremely mundane strategy.

“Yes, I, Sasara, shall take care of this! By the way, would you mind if I took a picture of you in your kimono, Lady Ouka? *Ka-shak!*”

“Don’t take my photo before you get my okay. Wait, I think the obi is a little loose, don’t you think? Oh—”

Plop.

The obi, the one thing that was holding it all together, fell to the floor.

Her kimono fell open.

In front of Sasara.

Bshaaaaaa. (That’s the sound of blood gushing from Sasara’s nose.)

★ ★

“So this is a nosebleed…”

It seemed like she had lost an impossible amount of blood, but if she was okay, then Ryouta wasn’t going to question it.

“At first, I was really scared, because she kept calling my name while she was collapsed on the floor. But this happens constantly, so she’ll probably wake up in a little bit.”

“Well, all’s well, then… I honestly thought something had happened to you.”

“Shiren…”

“It’s fine, Big Sis. I just did what any little sister would do.”

“You destroyed the door, so you’ll have to pay for it.”

Ouka spoke casually.

“Huh?”

“Well, you came here and smashed it, so you need to pay for damages. Today was our opening day, you know. Oh, you’re acting very guilty right now; don’t tell me—”

After checking the extent of the damage to the set, they decided to postpone the opening for a whole week.

One hour later.

“Haunted houses are scary, Ryouta,” Shiren said, gazing up at the building.

“Yeah. True horror,” Ryouta agreed.

They looked like they’d just run a marathon: *We have no words for this; we used up everything we had*.

“Ryouta.” Shiren leaned on Ryouta’s chest.

“What is it, Shiren?”

“I want to run away with you,” Shiren said thoughtfully. “I just want to go far, far away. And forget about the Empire.”

Ryouta was painfully aware of how she felt.

“Yeah, I feel exactly the same way—how much were the damages?”

“Five million sacred yen.”

“I want to run away.”

“I want to defect to Japan.”

The repair van came and parked in front of the haunted house.

Both of them silently prayed for the repairs to be cheap.

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's Kisetsu Morita.

Did you know that I moved into a little corner of Tokyo during the hottest time of the year? I've been visiting temples and shrines at my leisure. The sheer number of people here is incredible.

Now, Volume 5 has a connection to my move, with Ryouta going to serve in Tokyo for some reason… Well, that was retrofitted to the situation, but I came up with this plot before I decided to relocate.

This volume is what we'd call the Alfoncina volume. Her character strikes me as the kind who would be familiar with the big city, so I bet she knows Tokyo well—that was my train of thought anyway. So here we are.

Honestly, I've been going around to a lot of temples and shrines in the city, but I don't know anything about downtown Tokyo, so I tried to stick to places I was most familiar with. (As of now, a temple called Shiofune Kannon-ji is my favorite in Tokyo. I got there by bus from Kabe Station on the Ome Line.)

Akihabara, where Ryouta and Alfoncina go for shopping, is a place I would often visit for meetings and not shopping before I moved here.

Then when my meetings were over, I would go back to Tokyo Station from Akihabara, then ride the Shinkansen back to Fukui. If I wanted to return without staying the night, then I would have to take a Shinkansen that left at around eight PM exactly if I wanted to make it back on time, and I'd get home in the middle of the night. Worrying about the time like that really takes me back.

I also edited and included a short story from an online magazine, which is a fun little extra, so I hope you enjoy it!

But it's only been about a month since I moved to Tokyo, and I'm feeling a whole lot of potential since I have so many colleagues from the industry here…

Back in Fukui, I never met anyone else writing stories, not counting the

times when people from Kanto would come visit, so I honestly thought there were only one or two people writing light novels per prefecture. I was uneasy on my own.

Now that I've come here, I get the impression that there are one or two light novel authors per neighborhood. I have so many colleagues that it feels kind of weird… If I threw a rock, it would probably hit another writer…

And now for our regularly scheduled thanks. As always, big thanks to Hiroki Ozaki for such beautiful illustrations!

I know you will take very good care of Ryouta, Shiren, and Morita in the future! Also, I'll pray for the good fortune of all those who'll take part in the process on Mount Takao!

See you in Volume 6.

1: She is the archbishop.

2: She is the archbishop.

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